



The Timothy McLean and Ashley Smith tragedies: Getting beyond the fear and stigma of mental illness

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Two terrible tragedies have vaulted into public awareness during the past few weeks. Both involved individuals who suffered from a mental illness and elicited much response from the Canadian public. These tragic events have also highlighted grave weaknesses in our understanding and approach to mental health in Canada.

The first event was the court trial of Vince Li who carried out the horrendous killing of Timothy McLean on a Greyhound bus in Manitoba, but was found not criminally responsible for the murder because he suffers from a mental illness.

The other was the public release of a report on the death by suicide of 19 year old Ashley Smith in a federal women's prison. The report concluded that her death was "preventable", and partially provoked by instructions to correctional staff that they should not intervene with Ms Smith when she attempted to asphyxiate herself.

In the first case, we must ask ourselves whether the early diagnosis and appropriate treatment of Vince Li's mental illness could have averted the death of an innocent person. Certainly the evidence is strong that people suffering from schizophrenia are rarely a danger to other people and, with proper treatment, can recover to live relatively normal lives.

Sadly this tragedy has mostly served to reinforce public stereotypes about the dangers of people with mental illness.

In the Ashley Smith case, a lack of understanding about the effects of prolonged emotional distress and the impact of incarceration on the emotionally vulnerable led to a situation where correctional officers stood by and watched as a young woman killed herself. It seems clear

that better mental health training and protocols that protect people in emotional crisis could have averted this tragedy.

These two serious events reflect our society's approach to mental health and mental illness. Mental health is, for the most part, ignored. We have programs that promote physical health, but little has been done to actively promote mental health, despite the fact that mental health challenges affect us all in one way or another.

One in four persons in Canada will require treatment for a mental illness and/or addiction. Most of us know someone who has suffered from depression, anxiety or other mental health problems. And yet mental illness is still an issue avoided in conversation.

Some have compared this avoidance to the vast public silence around HIV and AIDS twenty-five years ago or the hush that surrounded cancer in the past. With both diseases fear was a common factor: fear that we could 'catch' it; fear that the person who had 'it' was incurable and therefore doomed. Today, thanks to research, and open discussion on the part of survivors, we know that cancer and AIDS are illnesses that can be treated.

Mental illness today suffers from stigma that is at least comparable to that of cancer or AIDS in the past. There is still a tremendous reluctance in Canadian society to talk openly and learn about mental illness – and this must be overcome.

A strong mental health literacy program for all age groups would be a good beginning. Such a program would teach people what good mental health is, how to maintain it; how to identify the signs of declining mental health; what resources are available; and how to identify and assist people requiring help for their mental health issues.

We can only have tremendous compassion for Timothy McLean, his family, and all of the other victims on the bus that day. This compassion compels us as a society to use our institutions to investigate and institute measures that will safeguard Canadians from similar harm in the future.

But our compassion should also lead us to challenge the stigma against mental illness and other obstacles that so profoundly interfere with the treatment and recovery of affected people. We must also accept responsibility as a society to care for the victims of mental illness just as we care for people who have cancer or HIV/AIDS.

We cannot truly say that justice will be served in the cases of Timothy McLean and Ashley Smith until we also examine the fact that gaps in treatment, stigma, fear, discrimination and cultural perceptions of mental illness also played a role in these tragedies.

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