

Accessibility news:

Demolish the stigma of mental illness

Society is slowly coming to terms with the acceptance and accommodation of people with disabilities. But it continues to be a long, hard struggle.

I can remember how unusual it was to see a wheelchair accessible wash-room or ramps going into building, sights which are now commonplace. Kneeling or no step buses, automated door openers, railings, Braille elevator buttons, descriptive video and closed captioning, the recognition of service animals; all are positive reflections of changing attitudes, and all describe accommodations for a physical impairment.

Society, however, is less successful when confronted with a person who has a mental illness or disability. One in five Ontarians will suffer from a mental disability or illness at one time in their life and it affects people of all ages, ethnicity, gender and economic status.

These individuals have been stigmatized and marginalized. Due to inaccurate information and misunderstanding we have stereotyped ideas of what these people are like. We believe they are aggressive and their behavior inevitably leads to dangerous manifestations. A typical reaction is one of fear and rejection.

Some of these perceptions have been

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reinforced by the media through characters and situations in movies, television and books. The news media can exploit this angle in their reporting. It is our pre-conceived ideas and our judgment that has become the primary barrier faced by these individuals.

The effect of this may result in an individual's loss of self esteem and hardships in cultivating friendships. Isolation and feelings of being rejected are common.

Additionally, societal judgments may cause a person to delay or deny the need to seek medical assistance for themselves or family. These people can face refusal when trying to acquire housing, loans, health insurance and jobs.

We need to demolish this barrier through education and treat people with compassion and understanding.

Andrew Tutty is a member of the Halton Hills Accessibility Advisory Committee

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