

Psychologists warn on term 'mentally ill'

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There is debate within the mental health field on whether depression should be labelled a mental illness. *Photo: Tamara Voninski*

PEOPLE with depression and anxiety should not be described as "mentally ill" because it labels them as potentially "dangerous, crazy and violent", a group of psychologists has claimed.

The Australian College of Specialist Psychologists believes the term "mental illness" can put people off seeking treatment and it should only be used for psychiatric conditions such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder.

In a discussion paper sent to Mental Health Minister Mark Butler this month, college president Jillian Horton said depression and anxiety should be described as "psychological disorders" to avoid patients being pushed into a medical model of treatment and given drugs they may not need.

Dr Horton also took aim at beyondblue, telling *The Sunday Age* the national depression agency should not call depression a mental illness in its awareness campaigns.

"Mental illness is a term that in many people's minds is linked to the old asylum days and people being crazy and unpredictable and violent. If someone's depressed or anxious and they're being labelled mentally ill, it is stigmatising and it puts a lot of people off getting help," Dr Horton said. "Beyondblue has done a lot of good with regard to reducing stigmatisation but I think it's been a mistake that they've used that term 'mental illness' in relation to depression. There's a huge difference in level of function, in terms of disability between someone who has schizophrenia and someone who's depressed or anxious."

However, David Castle, head of psychiatry at Melbourne's St Vincent's hospital, said it was flawed thinking. "There are plenty of people with schizophrenia who function extremely effectively and have full-time jobs and there are plenty of people with severe depression and severe anxiety disorders who are totally incapable of doing anything. You're trying to destigmatise one group by over-stigmatising another group and that's just totally unfair," Professor Castle said.

Beyondblue chief executive Kate Carnell said the organisation would continue to refer to depression and anxiety as mental disorders because this is how they are listed in both the International Classification of Diseases and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders - documents used worldwide by physicians to diagnose health problems.

"Our whole argument has been that people should see mental illness the same way as they see physical illness - it's something you need to seek help for, get treatment and you'll get better," Ms Carnell said. "I can't help but read their recommendations and think that there might be a bit of self-interest from private practice psychologists here."

In last year's budget, the federal government cut the number of Medicare-funded psychological therapy sessions a patient can access per year from 18 to 10. In the college's discussion paper, they said the move was a mistake and called for 20 to 25 sessions a year. They also called for the establishment of "psychological care centres" to treat people suffering high prevalence conditions, such as depression, anxiety and eating disorders.

Dr Horton said using the term "mental illness" meant people were more likely to be offered medication than psychotherapy.

However, Darren Stones, from Glenroy, who was diagnosed with anxiety and depression in 2009, said he had no problem with the term "mental illness". "The term 'psychological disorder', when used in reference to mental ill health, indicates that a person may be deranged and possibly beyond overcoming depression. The word 'disorder' is very severe when used in describing people with mental ill health, and quite frankly, I think it is inappropriate language."

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