

Raising awareness of mental health issues is not enough

January 31 2018, by Bettina Friedrich



Credit: Dmytro Zinkevych/Shutterstock

The profile of mental health has been raised significantly in the past few years, partly due to campaigning from mental health charities and partly due to high-profile people – from [Prince Harry](#) to [Professor Green](#) – speaking publicly and candidly about their own mental health problems. All of this should be welcomed as it removes the stigma around mental health and encourages people who are suffering in silence to seek help.

However, the [awareness](#) movement is not without its pitfalls. It is sometimes co-opted by people to advance their own agenda, such as increasing a fanbase or grabbing media attention.

YouTube celebrity, Logan Paul, recently caused outrage when he uploaded a video of a dead person in Aokigahara forest in Japan – a place known to be a frequent site for suicides. The video was viewed more than [9m times](#) before Paul took it down. The YouTube "vlogger" [apologised](#), saying he "intended to raise awareness for suicide and suicide prevention". Judging by the response on Twitter, many people weren't convinced by his excuse.

The awareness movement has also, at times, been hijacked by politicians and bureaucrats. They publicly declare their commitment to raising awareness – drawing plaudits for their sensitivity and bravery – while simultaneously under-investing in mental health services.

Late last year, it was revealed that half of all Clinical Commissioning Groups – NHS bodies responsible for commissioning healthcare services for their local area – are not planning on spending more on mental health services this financial year, despite a huge increase in demand for these services. Speaking to [The Independent](#), Labour MP Luciana Berger said: "Theresa May claims to be committed to improving mental health but her cuts are harming mental health services."

A few months earlier, a BBC Radio 5 Live [investigation](#) found that, out of 39 mental health trusts that provided figures for their crisis teams, 27 had seen their workload massively increase, "but without a comparable rise in funding".

Not 'either-or' but 'both'

Mental health stigma is of course very real, [affecting the lives](#) of people

with mental health problems as well as those close to them. [Research has shown](#) that fear of being labelled and stigmatised affects people's willingness to disclose their illness and seek treatment, so it is laudable that ignorance about the causes of [mental ill health](#) and treatment options are being discussed.

But the debate around awareness shouldn't cover up the very [serious problems](#) mental health services face. It is all very well to tell people that it is okay to have a [mental health problem](#) and that they should seek the necessary treatment, but if the healthcare system isn't functioning as it should, awareness campaigns ring hollow.

Public education on mental health problems, and on how to find help, needs to go hand-in-hand with making improvements to mental health services. While politicians speak about mental health awareness and the importance of seeking [mental health treatment](#), further cuts to NHS mental health services are hanging over the fate of those afflicted by mental ill health.

Those in charge of the mental healthcare system should be held accountable and not be allowed to hide behind the sometimes nebulous awareness debate. People with mental [health](#) problems not only need public awareness and understanding, but a functioning [mental health service](#).

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Raising awareness of mental health issues is not enough (2018, January 31) retrieved 2 July 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-01-awareness-mental-health-issues.html>

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