



MENTAL HEALTH EUROPE – SANTE MENTALE EUROPE aisbl
Boulevard Clovis 7, B-1000 Brussels
Tel +32 2 280 04 68 - Fax +32 2 280 16 04
E-Mail: info@mhe-sme.org
www.mhe-sme.org

Brussels, August 2, 2011

Equating mental health problems with violence – Prejudices resurface in coverage of Norway killings

The killings in Norway have left 77 people dead and a whole world mourning. In a shocking attack on humanity and the values Europeans hold dearly, Anders Behring Breivik has demonstrated the dangers of extremism, be it religious or political. Breivik can be called many things - a murderer, assailant or plotter – but Mental Health Europe believes it is unfair and irresponsible to call him a **madman**, at least until any mental health problem he might suffer from is duly proven in court.

Moreover, labeling Breivik a **madman**, a politically incorrect term obviously preferred by sensationalist media, is offensive towards people with mental health problems, who already face daily discrimination and stigmatization. The World Health Organization has established that people with mental health problems are the most discriminated of all people with disabilities, often as a result of ignorance and prejudice. And such prejudice is only reinforced by equating mental health problems with gruesome acts of violence like the Norway attacks. Especially when, in fact, several very reliable studies have discovered that mental health problems play no part in the majority of violent crimes, and that users or ex-users of mental health services are more likely to be victims, rather than perpetrators of violence. Indeed, research showed that people with mental health problems were 2.5 times more prone to becoming victims of violence compared to other members of society.

It is only natural for the human mind to search for answers in the face of dramatic events. However, over-simplification can lead to wrong and hasty conclusions. Breivik may or may not suffer from mental health problems. That is not the issue here. The problem lies with instantly assuming that Breivik **must** have mental health problems in order to commit such hideous crimes, while mental health problems alone generally do not lead to violent acts. Other risk factors, such as childhood abuse, substance use, or past violent behavior are far more reliable predictors of future violence.

By calling Breivik a madman, the media further reinforces damaging stereotypes related to people with mental health problems, and ignores the larger context of the killings. And by doing so, it fails both its readers and one of the most vulnerable groups in society.

For more information, please contact Mental Health Europe, at info@mhe-sme.org or +32 2 280 04 68

About Mental Health Europe

Mental Health Europe (MHE) is an organisation committed to the promotion of positive mental health, the prevention of mental distress, the improvement of care, advocacy for social inclusion and the protection of human rights for people with mental health problems, their families and carers. MHE vision is of a Europe where mental health and well-being is given high priority in the political spectrum and on the European health and social agenda, where people with mental health problems live as full citizens with access to appropriate services and support when needed, and where meaningful participation is guaranteed at all levels of decision-making and administration. MHE's values are based on dignity and respect, equal opportunities, freedom of choice, anti-discrimination, social inclusion, democracy and participation.