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Pete Earley: Understanding real face of mental illness

By Pete Earley -

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Virginia Gov. Timothy M. Kaine has created an independent panel to review all aspects of last week's Virginia Tech massacre. He has recruited former homeland security secretary Tom Ridge, a retired state police superintendent and experts from education, law enforcement and psychiatry. What's missing is someone who has personal experience struggling with a mental disorder.

We may never know whether Seung-Hui Cho had a mental illness such as bipolar disorder, schizophrenia or major depression, or whether his wrath was an episodic outburst committed by a sociopath.

These psychiatric distinctions are important; the most prevalent mental illnesses are not caused by bad upbringings, bullying or immoral behavior but are considered by the National Institute of Mental Health to be brain "sicknesses" that can affect nearly anyone. Sadly, these differences will not matter to many Americans: Because of Cho's vengeful video rants, he has unfortunately become the de facto face of mental illness.

Cho, of course, is not representative of Americans who have had diagnoses of mental illness.

Some more familiar faces include CBS journalist Mike Wallace, actress Patty Duke, Rep. Patrick J. Kennedy, D-R.I., and writers such as William Styron and Kurt Vonnegut. Most Americans with mental health problems are simply ordinary people dealing with what can be extremely difficult and cruel disorders.

For many years, concerned parents, relatives, friends, psychiatrists and even government officials have tried to help people with mental disorders by finding ways to treat their illnesses.

They have learned that the best teachers are often those who have struggled personally with mental health problems and have found ways to recover.

Kaine, in not appointing a panel member who has publicly struggled with a debilitating mental illness, has missed an opportunity to remind the nation that Cho and his actions do not accurately reflect the millions of Americans who have brain disorders. Naming such a person would help reduce fears about people with mental illnesses at a time when Cho's psychosis-fueled executions have increased stigma.

Just as important, someone who has experienced the isolation and self-loathing that often accompany depression and serious mental disorders would be in a better position than others to recognize, understand and explain why someone such as Cho may have avoided seeking and receiving help before it was too late.

Because the public tends to see a mentally ill person only when the person is clearly psychotic or has been abandoned on our streets, the suggestion of having a person with a mental illness on the investigative panel may strike some as odd. But that reaction reflects the stigma and prejudice that need to be squelched.

Kaine would be wise to invite onto the panel someone who understands firsthand what it is like to be tormented by a mental disorder.

Kay Redfield Jamison, author of "An Unquiet Mind" and a professor of psychiatry at Johns Hopkins University, is regarded as one of the nation's leading experts on bipolar disorder -- an illness that she knows intimately because she has it. She or other experts would be familiar with what barriers persons who have mental disorders see when it comes to getting help and what helped them overcome their illnesses -- from their own perspective when they were racing along the edge of madness.

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