

## A Proposal for Postmodern Stress Disorder



To the Editor:

We thank Eiser<sup>1</sup> for raising the issue of media violence and its potential deleterious effects. Eiser argues for a newly defined diagnosis—Postmodern Stress Disorder—to categorize individuals whose violent acts result from media exposure.

We agree with Eiser that physicians should take a media history, and caution patients to limit its use and choose media carefully. Media histories should be a part of all forensic evaluations.

However, until we know more, we urge humility regarding risk, cause, and effect. The American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual 5<sup>th</sup> Edition*<sup>2</sup> aims for "consistent, strong and objective scientific validators of disorders" (p. 5). This caution is warranted.

If mental health professionals assign inordinate influence to media as a cause of violence, this could distort understanding about the multifactorial nature of crime and violence. Lawyers would attempt to use this new disorder to diminish their client's personal responsibility. Media violence is pervasive, and examples of violent media exposure predating violent crime are common—whether or not they are causally related. Eiser's proposed "Postmodern Stress Disorder" could thus lead to many false positives.

Over-focusing on the media could also inadvertently undermine steps to reduce violence by turning attention

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away from more important, but less easily addressed influences: mental health, substance abuse, family dynamics, the justice system, and socioeconomic factors.

Reducing violence has always been a challenge for humanity. The substantial decrease in violence over the last millennia is an important human achievement, despite the headlines and common impression. We should not be complacent about continuing to decrease violence and crime. Reducing violent media use population-wide is an important, but small, part of that effort. The interplay between violence, media, and mental illness is a legitimate and vexing problem without easy solutions.<sup>3</sup> On an individual level, we are just at the beginning of understanding the many relationships between violence, crime, and media use.<sup>4</sup> We maintain that assigning a disorder label is premature and could have negative consequences.

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