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ISSTD Statement on “Split”

This weekend marks the debut of M Night Shyamalan’s new thriller “Split”, about a deranged individual with Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) who abducts and terrorizes three young women. With respect to Mr. Shyamalan’s ability to write and direct truly frightening movies, depicting individuals with this, or any other mental disorder, does a disservice to his artistic ability and to the over 20% of the population who, at some time or another, struggle with some form of mental illness. It acts to further marginalize those who already struggle on a daily basis with the weight of stigma.

DID was formerly known as Multiple Personality Disorder. This psychological disorder is nearly always the result of severe and persistent childhood trauma of some nature (e.g., child abuse and neglect). Most of the people who experience this disorder also meet the criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder. While it has always been deemed rare and frequently sensationalized in writing and in movies, it is estimated that this disorder is experienced by 1 to 3% of the general population worldwide. In the United States, that would mean that (conservatively) there are between three and 10 million individuals who struggle with this disorder. Because of a general lack of understanding and effective training of professionals who engage in psychological support services, it takes the average person who has this disorder 7 years before they are able to find someone who can provide accurate diagnosis and treatment for it.

The reality of this disorder is that most of the individuals who experience it suffer greatly, and present no more risk of violence than the population in general. While it has been severely understudied compared to many other mental disorders, in recent years there has been much more research accomplished. In a soon-to-be published research paper (Mental Illness and Violent Behavior: The Role of Dissociation), Webermann and Brand, found that of 173 individuals in treatment for DID or a disorder very similar to it, only 3% reported having been charged with an offense in the past six months, while 1.8% were fined, and 0.6% were incarcerated in this time period. No convictions or probations in the prior 6 months were reported. None of the symptoms reliably predicted recent criminal behavior. Their conclusion was that, in this representative sample of individuals with a dissociative disorder, recent criminal justice involvement was low and symptoms did not predict criminality. This suggests that the features of the disorder are not related to engaging in criminal activity.

The 1000 plus therapists and practitioners in the International Society for the Study of Trauma and Dissociation (ISSTD) and the tens of thousands across the world who treat complex trauma and dissociative disorders understand the desire to make entertaining movies that make money. We would ask that this not be done at the expense of a vulnerable population that struggles to be recognized and receive the effective treatment that they deserve. Sadly, it is very probable that even just 1% of the gross profit from this movie will be more than all of the research funding that this common and complex disorder has ever received. Shyamalan and Universal Studios will make millions from this movie. We hope they will take this opportunity to help the community of patients by supporting education and research about DID.