

The Unique Needs of Older Adults with Serious Mental Illness

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What is Serious Mental Illness (SMI)

- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) definition

“A diagnosable mental, behavior, or emotional disorder that causes serious functional impairment, that substantially interferes with or limits one or more major life activities”

- Not diagnosis-specific
- The course is usually episodic, with periods of recurrence and remission of symptoms across the life span
- Often accompanied by persistent functional impairment, even in periods of remission

Common SMI Diagnoses

- Schizophrenia
- Bipolar Disorder
- Major Depressive Disorder

Many People with SMI Face Obstacles

- Face stigma and discrimination when seeking employment, housing, and health services
- Have high rates of unemployment
- Are more likely to live below the poverty line
- Have high rates of homelessness
- Have lower levels of social support
- Receive poorer quality of medical care
- Have high rates of traumatic experiences

Medical Comorbidity

People with SMI:

- Have higher rates of obesity, diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, respiratory disorders, gastrointestinal disorders, and other medical conditions
- Die, on average, 20 years younger than the general US population, mostly due to medical illness such as cardiovascular disease

Medical Comorbidity (continued)



- Despite their higher rates of medical illness, people with SMI tend to obtain **fewer medical services** or those of inferior quality.

Complications of Aging

As people with SMI age:

- Rates and severity of medical problems, including heart and lung disease, increase
- Their psychiatric symptoms may continue to fluctuate
- They may continue to struggle with poverty, homelessness, unemployment, and poor social support
- Some experience age-related cognitive decline and dementia

Older Adults with SMI

Compared to older adults generally, older adults with SMI:

- Are less physically fit

- Have less muscle strength

- Have weaker grip strength

And, they have higher rates of:

- Problems with mobility

- Cognitive decline

- Dementia

- Falls

Early Institutionalization

- Nearly four times the risk for placement in long-term care in their forties and fifties, when compared to the general population
- Three-fifths of individuals with schizophrenia admitted to nursing homes are younger than 65

Take-Home Messages

- Older adults with SMI have complex care needs
- They are at increased risk for placement in long-term care at a younger age
- To take care of these individuals in a CLC setting, it's important to take an interdisciplinary approach to address medical, psychiatric, social and cognitive issues
- It's also important to remember that these individuals have likely been through a lot in their lives
- **By working together and taking an empathic approach, we can help these individuals get the holistic care they need**