



# Social Skills Training for Serious Mental Illness Fact Sheet for Providers

## Discussing Social Skills Training with Veterans

- SST can help individuals better communicate with others and develop the skills necessary to work on personal recovery goals.
- Before the first group session, group members meet in an individual session with a group leader to identify a personal goal or goal(s) to work on in the group.
- SST group sessions involve learning the steps of social skills and practicing these skills in roleplays.
- The groups are designed to be very supportive, positive, and often fun.
- To enhance learning and goal achievement, group members are encouraged to practice social skills taught in group in meaningful ways outside of the group.
- Individuals who complete SST tend to function better in the community.

## What Are Social Skills?

Social skills are the behaviors in which people engage when interacting with others. Effective social skills can help individuals achieve personal goals. All types of social situations, such as having a conversation, making friends, even ordering a sandwich at a deli, require social skills.

## What Are Some Examples of Social Skills?

Social skills include what people say and how they say it. Both verbal and non-verbal behavior influences communication. For example, in addition to the verbal message conveyed during a conversation, a person's body language, tone of voice, facial expressions, and eye contact during the conversation all influence the communication. Social Skills Training for Serious Mental Illness (SST) focuses on improving both verbal and non-verbal behavior so that individuals can be more socially effective.

## Why Are Social Skills Important?

Effective social skills help people build positive relationships, support recovery, and pursue valued personal goals. People with psychiatric illness may experience a higher rate of difficulties with social skills. This can negatively impact the quality of their relationships and the quality of their lives. For example, some clients may have difficulty with establishing or maintaining eye contact, or have difficulty starting a conversation or making a request. Helping clients improve social skills can improve their

social adjustment in the community and support progress in reaching their personal goals.

## What Are the Causes of Social Skills Deficits?

Social skills deficits in individuals with psychiatric illness may be the result of several, sometimes interacting, factors. Some clients may have developed deficits in social skills as a direct result of their psychiatric illness. Others may have developed their psychiatric illness before they had the opportunity to refine their social skills. Individuals who have spent long periods in hospitals or other institutional settings may have experienced a decline in social skills because of the limited social expectations in many of these environments. For different reasons, many individuals with psychiatric illness could benefit from an intervention such as SST, which enhances social skills.

## What is Social Skills Training?

SST is a structured format for teaching interpersonal skills that incorporates modeling, roleplays, and other behavioral learning activities. SST is primarily conducted in a group format with one or two group leaders. Prior to the first group session, clients attend an individual session for orientation to the intervention and to have an opportunity to set a personal goal or goals for the social skills group. The group sessions are designed to be very supportive (and even fun!) for group members. Sessions incorporate a lot of positive reinforcement as a means of encouraging clients and reinforcing improved social behavior. Each group session focuses on a

selected social skill. Early in the group, the rationale and steps for each social skill are discussed and the group members have an opportunity to observe the group leader(s) as they model the skill in a roleplay. Each group member then has an opportunity to practice the skill in a series of three roleplays based on a personally relevant scenario. Behaviorally specific, positive feedback from the group leader(s) and group members regarding the use of the social skill, as well as a suggestion or two to make the next roleplay even better, follows each roleplay. To enhance learning and goal achievement, group members are encouraged to practice social skills taught in group in meaningful ways outside of the group.

## How Often Should Social Skills Training Be Conducted?

It is preferable to offer social skills groups on a frequent (at least twice weekly) basis. The more often clients have an opportunity to practice, the more rapidly their social skills will improve. However, the frequency,

length, and duration of the social skills groups may vary, depending on the treatment setting and group members' needs and preferences.

## What Types of Social Skills Can Be Taught?

There is a wide range of skills (both basic and advanced) that can be taught in social skills groups. The social skills curriculum for a particular group will depend on the needs and preferences of the group members. Some social skills are considered "basic" in part because they are fundamental to many different types of social interactions. These include the skills of listening to others, making requests, as well as expressing positive and/or unpleasant feelings. In addition to the "basic" skills, other skills covered may include those relevant to starting and maintaining a conversation, assertiveness skills such as refusing requests, and conflict management skills such as compromise and negotiation. Other skill domains that can be taught include social skills relevant to communal living, friendship

and dating, health maintenance, sobriety, and the workplace.

## Who Can Benefit from Social Skills Training?

SST can be useful for people who have identified social skills development as a goal for treatment and who have a primary psychiatric diagnosis of schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, bipolar disorder, or treatment refractory depression. The Uniform Mental Health Services in VA Medical Centers guidelines (2008) require that SST is available to Veterans with serious mental illness at every VA Psychosocial Rehabilitation and Recovery Center (PRCC), VA Medical Center, and very large CBOCs. In SST, the focus is on individuals gaining social skills as a means to work toward a valued personal recovery goal that involves interacting with others. The client identifies a personal recovery goal, or goals, in the individual session prior to the first group and then works toward achieving these goal(s) over the course of the group.

## References

- Bellack, A. S., Mueser, K. T., Gingerich, S., & Agresta, J. (2004). *Social Skills Training for Schizophrenia: A Step by Step Guide, 2nd Edition*. New York: The Guilford Press.
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- Dixon, L. B., Dickerson, F., Bellack, A. S., Bennett, M., Dickinson, D., Goldberg, R. W., ... Kreyenbuhl J. (2010). Schizophrenia Patient Outcomes Research Team (PORT). The 2009 schizophrenia PORT psychosocial treatment recommendations and summary statements. *Schizophrenia Bulletin*, 36(1),48-70.
- Kurtz, M. W. & Mueser, K. T. (2008). A Meta-Analysis of Controlled Research on Social Skills Training for Schizophrenia. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 76(3), 491-504.

Portions of this brochure adapted from Social Skills Training for Schizophrenia (2nd ed.) by Alan S. Bellack, Kim T. Mueser, Susan Gingerich, and Julie Agresta. Copyright 2004 by The Guilford Press.

## How Effective is Social Skills Training?

SST is an evidence-based practice for persons with serious mental illness (Dixon et al., 2010). A meta-analysis of controlled research on SST (Kurtz & Mueser, 2008) supports the efficacy of SST for improving social skill acquisition and psychosocial functioning.

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Consult with your Local Evidence-Based Psychotherapy Coordinator, your VISN's SST Regional Master Trainer, or any of the trained SST providers in your area. Visit the VA SST for Serious Mental Illness intranet site for additional information and materials, <http://vaww.mentalhealth.va.gov/ebp/sst.asp>