The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) offers Social Skills Training for Serious Mental Illness (SST) to Veterans across the VA health care system. SST helps Veterans improve social skills, meet recovery goals, and integrate into the community.

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans Health Administration
Office of Mental Health & Suicide Prevention

To learn more about SST, please talk with your local VA provider.

SOCIAL SKILLS TRAINING

FOR SERIOUS MENTAL ILLNESS

WHAT ARE SOCIAL SKILLS?

Social skills are the skills we use when interacting with other people. All social situations require the use of social skills. Examples of situations in which we use social skills include having a conversation, making friends, or ordering a sandwich at a deli. SST helps people learn how to communicate better with others, get along better with others, and get more out of life. Social skills are life skills that support recovery and help people achieve their goals.

WHAT IS SOCIAL SKILLS TRAINING?

SST is a group treatment that follows the same format each week. In SST, each social skill is broken down into a few easy steps. Group members then practice the social skill by acting in a pretend situation called a role-play.

Veterans interested in SST first attend an individual session with a group leader. Here they learn about the group and decide on personal goals to work on during the social skills group. Group members then participate in SST group sessions. Each group session focuses on learning one main social skill. Early in the group session, the reasons for using the skill, and steps for engaging in the skill, are discussed. Group members then have a chance to watch the group leader(s) role-play how to use the skill. Each group member then has a chance to practice the skill in three role-plays. After each role-play, group leader(s) and group members provide specific, positive comments on the use of the skill. One or two ideas on how to make the next role-play even better are also given to the group member practicing the skill. It is common for group sessions to include applause and specific compliments on what each group member did well. At the end of the session, group members are asked to practice the social skill they learned outside of the group session.

WHO CAN BENEFIT FROM SOCIAL SKILLS TRAINING?

SST groups help people learn how to communicate better with strangers, friends, loved ones, medical and mental health professionals, bosses, co-workers and others. SST is recommended to individuals who have a primary psychiatric diagnosis of schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, bipolar disorder, or depression that has not responded to other treatments.

HOW DO SOCIAL SKILLS TRAINING GROUPS BENEFIT GROUP MEMBERS?

SST groups are beneficial to group members in several ways. First, SST groups are focused on helping group members to reach their own personal recovery goals. Second, the skills learned in SST are helpful in everyday life. Third, SST groups teach the steps necessary to successfully apply the skills in the real world. Next, SST groups provide opportunities to practice the skills over and over, in role-plays and real life situations, until the skills are mastered. Finally, SST groups are very supportive, positive, and great fun!

WHAT IS EXPECTED OF GROUP MEMBERS?

In SST, group members are expected to be supportive of other group members. They are also expected to be willing to learn new social skills. Finally, SST group members are expected to practice the social skills taught in group.

HOW LONG DOES SOCIAL SKILLS TRAINING LAST?

The length and frequency of an SST group depends on the setting, as well as the needs of the group members. SST groups are usually held once or twice a week and may last up to six months. A group leader can provide more specific information about SST groups available at your VA.

DOES SOCIAL SKILLS TRAINING WORK?

Research has shown that SST groups help group members improve their social skills and more successfully integrate into their community, as demonstrated by better social adjustment and more independent living (Kurtz & Mueser, 2008).

CAN I PARTICIPATE IN SOCIAL SKILLS TRAINING AND OTHER INTERVENTIONS FOR MENTAL ILLNESS AT THE SAME TIME?

Yes, you can! You do not need to stop other mental health treatment or medications while you are in a SST group. Be sure to talk with your mental health treatment team so that you may develop a treatment plan. SST may be a helpful part of this plan. Your SST group leader may ask for your permission to talk with your providers to let them know about your care.

HOW CAN SOCIAL SKILLS TRAINING HELP ME?

SST can help you improve your social skills. Improving your social skills may help you to communicate better with others. SST can help improve and maintain your relationships, support recovery, and help you get what you want and need out of life. In SST, you meet with a group leader and talk about the goal or goals you want to work on in group. Then, in the group, you can work on your personal goal using the social skills you learn in group. Social Skills Training can help you move forward on the goals that are important to you.

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.

A review of research on SST can be found in 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.