

# 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**