

# Cognition in Serious Mental Illness

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# Cognitive Deficits in SMI

- Serious mental illnesses (SMI) like schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and severe and persistent depression are brain diseases.
- Many individuals with SMI exhibit cognitive impairment.
- Cognitive deficits in SMI typically occur prior to, and at onset of illness and are generally stable thereafter in most patients
  - Can fluctuate depending on severity of psychiatric symptoms
  - This is unlike cognitive deficits in dementia, which continue to deteriorate as the disease progresses
- A small subset of people with SMI experience accelerated cognitive decline with aging.

# Cognitive Deficits in SMI

- Severity of cognitive deficits varies amongst individuals with SMI.
  - Cognitive impairment is strongly associated with severity of negative symptoms (i.e., diminished emotional expression, avolition, alogia, anhedonia, asociality).
  - Cognitive deficits are not correlated with positive symptoms (e.g., delusions, hallucinations).
  - Cognition tends to be less impaired in patients who have an affective component to their psychotic illness (e.g. schizoaffective and bipolar disorders).

# Cognitive Deficits in SMI

- Cognitive functioning is predictive of day-to-day functioning, including the ability to:
  - comprehend and plan recreational activities
  - manage finances
  - communicate effectively
  - use public transportation
  - manage household chores
- Most individuals with SMI have decision-making capacity
  - Depends on the severity of cognitive deficits
  - Can fluctuate depending on severity of psychiatric symptoms

# Cognitive Deficits in SMI

- Global cognitive deficits are often present, but deficits are generally more pronounced in:
  - Attention
  - Memory
  - Executive functioning



# Attention

- Attention is the ability to concentrate on something for sustained periods of time
- People with SMI may have difficulties with:
  - Taking in and processing information, especially if the information is long or complex
  - Blocking out irrelevant stimuli
  - Understanding information communicated to them
  - Manipulating information for optimal problem-solving



**When working with someone with SMI, make sure the individual is attending, communicate in short simple statements, and repeat information.**

# Memory

- Memory is the ability to acquire knowledge and recall life events
- Memory impairment in SMI is typically not as severe as memory impairment in dementia
- People with SMI are more able to recall important events and learn new facts, especially with prompting and repetition
- People with SMI particularly have difficulty with prospective memory, which is the ability to remember to perform a planned action at a future point in time



**Individuals with SMI need reminders to help them attend appointments, take medications, or engage in activities at specific times.**

# Executive Functioning

- Executive functioning refers to a set of cognitive skills which together allow an individual to process information, make decisions, and attain goals. People with SMI exhibit significant deficits across these components of executive functioning:
  - **Problem-solving:** the ability to form a goal, develop plans to achieve the goal, implement the plans, and revise those plans if unsuccessful
  - **Theory of mind:** the ability to understand what others are thinking, important for developing empathy
  - **Abstract thinking:** the ability to understand and appreciate ideas or concepts that go beyond what is readily apparent to the senses



**Because of deficits in executive functioning, individuals with SMI benefit from external supports to help with decision-making and problem-solving.**



# Executive Functioning

- **Cognitive flexibility:** the ability change one's thinking or behaviors, particularly when faced with contradictory information or negative consequences. Cognitive rigidity is thought to underlie delusional thinking



**Given that individuals with SMI often exhibit cognitive rigidity, arguing with these individuals about their beliefs or behaviors is often ineffective.**

**Setting clear limits with consistent positive and negative consequences is more useful.**

# Summary

- Individuals with SMI exhibit cognitive impairment
- Severity of cognitive impairment varies widely
- Impairments in cognition are generally stable across the lifespan, with worsening during psychiatric episodes
- You can help individuals with SMI function and thrive by:
  - Communicating clearly in simple statements
  - Using repetition
  - Providing reminders
  - Setting clear limits
  - Sticking to set routines