



NEW ORLEANS

BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

ANSWERING GOD'S CALL

Working with Families of Individuals Diagnosed With Serious Mental Illness

A Systems Approach



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Objectives

- Participants will consider the impact of Serious Mental Illness on Systems Dynamics.
- Participants will examine traditional Systems Interventions as a resource for helping families of individuals with Serious Mental Illness.
- Participants will practice and critique interventions with families in role-play scenarios featuring family dynamics associated with Serious Mental Illness.



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What is SMI?

Serious mental illness (SMI) is defined as a mental, behavioral, or emotional disorder resulting in serious functional impairment, which substantially interferes with or limits one or more major life activities. The burden of mental illnesses is particularly concentrated among those who experience disability due to SMI.

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/mental-illness.shtml>



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The family is the primary treatment modality-like it or not

- Practical treatment resources for SMI clients have been in almost constant decline since deinstitutionalization.
- Psychopharmacological management has improved, but does little to alleviate negative symptoms and relational deficits.
- Most treatment plans for SMI clients rely heavily of family caregivers.

(Bellesheim, 2016)



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Systems Review

Characteristics of a Family System (Chalquist, 2003)

- Organized around interactions and within a hierarchy of interrelated subsystems.
- Wholeness: the system is greater than sum of the parts.
- Each part of the system affects all others.
- Interrelations emphasized more than components; systemwide ripples ("these cause each other") emphasized more than linearity (this causes that).
- Calibration: setting of a present-oriented, systemwide range limit around a comfortable emotional "bias."
- Self-regulating via feedback loops--negative (toward stability) and positive (toward change)--that maintain the bias.



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What are the major concerns of family members of individuals with SMI diagnoses?

- Family relationships 56.6
- Access to resources/benefits 38.4%
- Education about diagnosis 31.3%
- Independence/dependence 30.3%
- Denial/noncompliance 29.3%
- Problem behaviors 29.3%

(Pollio, et. al., 2001)



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How does Serious Mental Illness impact the family system?

- The function of the family in society is the support, regulation, nurturance and socialization of its members. The structure of a family must be strong enough to organize the necessary activities of the family and maintain order in crisis, yet flexible enough to allow change when such is in the best interest of the family.
- Minuchin: “An effectively functioning family is an open social system in transformation, maintaining links to the extrafamilial, possessing a capacity for development, and having an organizational structure composed of subsystems.”

(Minuchin & Fishman, 1981)

How does Serious Mental Illness impact the family system?

- Impairment of executive function.
- Difficulty maintaining healthy homeostasis.
- Difficulty establishing healthy communication protocols.
- Difficulty establishing and maintaining healthy relationships with outside organizations and individuals.
- Difficulty recognizing healthy development.



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Family Systems Approaches

- **Structural family therapy**, designed by Salvador Minuchin, looks at family relationships, behaviors, and patterns as they are exhibited within the therapy session in order to evaluate the structure of the family.
- **Intergenerational family therapy** acknowledges generational influences on family and individual behavior. Murray Bowen designed this approach to family therapy, using it in treatment for individuals and couples as well as families.



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Insight Oriented vs. Action Oriented

- Bowen and others sought to offer individuals insight into Systems dynamics with the expectation that such insight would naturally result in change.
- Minuchin and others sought to help families experience changes in their relational patterns that would result in reorganization of the family unit.



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Joining

- Joining with each member of the family may be the most important thing to get right.
- Joining well allows us to work with the system rather than competing individual perspectives.
- “The most crucial task in the first session is for you to successfully join with your clients. Joining means that clients feel a sense of connectedness with you, which usually arises when they feel you understand, respect, and care about them.”
(Patterson, et al, 2018)



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Types of Resistance to Joining

- A family member tries to introduce or speak for everyone.
- One or more family members want to skip ahead to a detailed description of the problem.
- Unnecessary management of impaired family member's presentation.



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Normalizing or “Systematizing”

- Engage family members in identifying the ways that symptoms and treatment of SMI impact their relational functioning.
- What do you want to do as a family that SMI prevents or complicates?
- What do you want to say to family members that SMI prevents or complicates?



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Establishing Functional Communication Protocols

- Recognition and respect for the speaker.
- Functional acknowledgement.
- Avoid assumptions based on non-responsiveness.



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Supporting the Executive Subsystem

- Exploring capacity to function in the presence of SMI family member.
- Functioning as a unit: speaking and listening.
- Inviting critique of process.

Practical Exercise #1

- Take turns practicing your script for joining with a SMI family.
- Take turns practicing your script for transitioning from joining to problem presentation.



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Practical Exercise #2

Playing it out



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