Demystifying Serious Mental Illness

A Trauma Informed and Strengths Based Approach
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Objectives

- Explore the challenges of working with individuals with serious mental illness (SMI).
- Identify strategies for implementing trauma informed care with the SMI population.
- Evaluate implementation of trauma informed care with individuals with SMI in a variety of settings.

Exploring Challenges

What is Serious Mental Illness (SMI)?

Experiencing significant impairment due to a variety of mental health issues, including schizophrenia and other psychotic disorders, depression, bipolar disorder, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder.[1]

SMI in the Movies
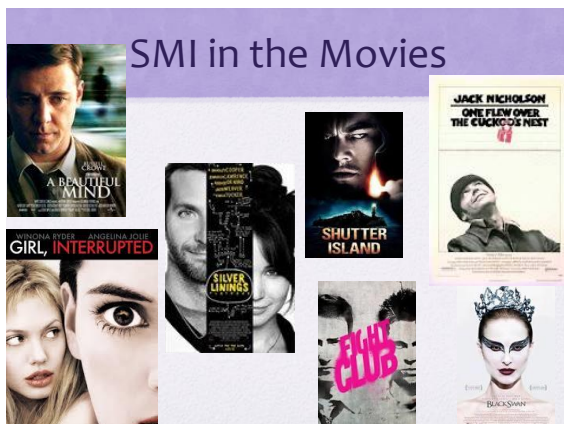
SMI in the Media

- Individuals with SMI are:
  - Violent or criminal
  - Childish or ignorant
  - All the same
  - Hopeless cases[2]

Stigma & Stereotypes

- What comes to mind when you think of:
  - Hearing voices
  - Seeing things
  - People talking to themselves
  - Schizophrenia
  - Bipolar disorder
  - Psychosis

Stigma & Stereotypes

- Stigma is increasing: more survey respondents are unwilling to have a person with schizophrenia living in their neighbhood[3]

- 25% of Americans report feeling uncomfortable around people with schizophrenia.[4]

- In a survey after the Newtown shooting:
  - 46% of respondents believed that "people with serious mental illness are, by far, more dangerous than the general population.
  - 67% were unwilling "to have a person with a serious mental illness as a neighbor".
  - 71% were unwilling "to have a person with a serious mental illness start working closely with you on a job."[5]

Challenges

- What challenges have you faced working with people with SMI in your setting?

- What biases do you notice in your organization?

- What hesitations do you have? Fears?

- Do you have training to work with folks with SMI?

What Do the Numbers Say?

- Individuals with SMI:
  - Experience trauma at much higher rates than the general population.[6]
  - Very often experience multiple traumas.[6]
  - Are much more likely to be the victim of a crime than the general population.[7]

So what?

- Social workers report frustration when working with this population due to:
  - Systemic and institutional barriers
  - Client related factors, such as behavioral issues and treatment challenges.[8,9]

- This frustration may impact social worker attitudes and increase social worker vulnerability to bias and stigma.

- Stigma is one of the most prevalent barriers to treatment seeking among people with mental health issues[10]

When we are comfortable, everyone benefits!

Using Trauma Informed Care

Trauma Informed Care (TIC)[11]

- View trauma in the context of clients' environment (interpersonal, community, societal, cultural, historical)
- Create a safe environment
- Support control, choice, and autonomy
- Create collaborative relationships and participation opportunities

TIC Continued

- Use a strengths-based perspective
- Promote resilience & self care
- Minimize risk of retraumatization or replaying trauma dynamics
- Provide hope – recovery is possible!

Ways We Retraumatize

- Lacking awareness of trauma and SMI symptoms
- Challenging or discounting client reports
- Being confrontational
- Allowing clients to act abusively towards one another
- Labeling behavior or feelings as pathological
- Limiting client's participation in their decision-making
- Minimizing, discrediting, or ignoring clients

Challenging Behaviors

- Emotion dysregulation
- Numbing
- Somatization
- Hyperarousal
- Idealization/rationalization
- Hallucinations or delusions
- Dissociation/derealization/depersonalization
- Reenactment and/or reckless behavior
- Avoidance
- Shame
- Lack of trust
- Fear

Approaching Clients

- Be matter-of-fact and supportive
- Respect personal space
- Be aware of your emotional responses
- Give clients as much autonomy and control as possible
- Allow time for understanding due to potential cognitive impairment
- Avoid judgments

Interacting with Clients

- Be sensitive to client needs despite behavior
- Don't ignore symptoms and demands when clients act out
- Listen for specific triggers
- Be mindful of shame and avoidance
- Don't fight delusions
- Focus on the feeling rather than behavior

Fostering Resilience

- Encourage social connection
- Empower clients to take action
- Routine provides stability
- Nurture positive view of personal/social/cultural resources
- Find perspective
- Maintain hope and optimism

Building Trust

- Use conflicts as opportunities to negotiate and work through
- Be mindful of staffing changes
- Respect the client-social worker relationship
- Be on time, be dependable, set boundaries, respect clients and their difficulty trusting you

Supporting Empowerment

- Offer choices and help clients make informed decisions
- Give clients chances for participation
- Encourage clients to take an active role
- Help clients establish sense of self-efficacy and confidence

Implementing TIC in Your Setting

What about your setting?

- Challenges to implementing these strategies?
- Fears or hesitation?
- Systemic barriers?
- Where can you go for support or additional training?
- Are some services easier or harder to adapt TIC for individuals with SMI?

Self-Care

- We must take care of ourselves if we want to care for others
  - Essential components
    - Awareness
    - Balance
    - Connection[11]

Questions?

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