



Behind the Term: Serious Mental Illness

Related terms: chronic mental illness, severe and persistent mental illness, serious and persistent mental illness, severe mental illness, schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorders, delusional disorder, manic-depressive disorder, major depressive disorder, bipolar and related disorders, psychotic disorders, posttraumatic stress disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, substance use disorders, eating and feeding disorders, affective disorders, and mood disorders

The terms *chronic mental illness*, *serious mental illness*, *serious and persistent mental illness*, *severe and persistent mental illness*, and *severe mental illness* are often used interchangeably; however, the most current terms used to refer to mental disorders requiring routine management are “serious mental illness” and “severe and persistent mental illness”. The terms “serious and persistent mental illness” and “seriously and persistently mentally ill” evolved from the term “chronically mentally ill”. However, with recognition that not all forms of serious mental illness are chronic and that persons diagnosed with a serious mental illness can be responsive to treatment, services, and recovery supports, “chronic” and “persistent” have been dropped from the federal definition and “mentally ill” has been replaced by person-first language (i.e., persons with serious mental illness).

Serious mental illness (SMI) and *severe and persistent mental illness (SPMI)* refer to distinct conditions; this is because, although all forms of serious mental illness may be disabling in some way, they are not always severe and persistent (that is, chronic and always disabling). So, although all severe and persistent mental illness may be serious, not all serious mental illness may be severe or persistent. Many mental health professionals, consumers, peers, and advocates use the term SMI to refer to severe mental illness, while the federal agencies use the term to refer to serious mental illness. Given this context and the potential for confusion and labeling effects, it may be best to avoid the acronym.

It is also important to note that definitions of serious mental illness vary, depending on whether the term is used for legal purposes (to establish eligibility for disability or supplemental social security benefits), clinical purposes, or epidemiological purposes (to track its prevalence and incidence over time). Although legal definitions may vary, epidemiological definitions must be based on standardized measures (such as questions used by the National Survey of Drug Use and

Behind the Term: Serious Mental Illness

Health) and remain stable over time. For clinical assessment and treatment purposes, a more multidisciplinary, biosocial approach for defining serious mental illness is needed.

The federal definition of serious mental illness resulted from a mandate from the 1992 Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Administration (ADAMHA) Reorganization Act (Public Law No. 102-321). This definition was created by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to help states applying for grant funds to support mental health services estimate the incidence and prevalence of serious mental illness (58 Fed. Reg. 96, 292425, 1993). Federal use of the term chronic mental illness dissolved, however, when consumers and advocates argued that the term had negative connotations, suggesting that some forms of mental illness are intractable (Goldman & Grob, 2006). As a result, *chronic mental illness* was changed to *severe and persistent mental illness*, and then later to *serious mental illness*.

As defined by federal regulation, a serious mental illness is a condition that affects “persons aged 18 or older who currently or at any time in the past year have had a diagnosable mental, behavioral, or emotional disorder (excluding developmental and substance use disorders) of sufficient duration to meet diagnostic criteria specified within DSM-IV (APA, 1994) that has resulted in serious functional impairment, which substantially interferes with or limits one or more major life activities” such as maintaining interpersonal relationships, activities of daily living, self-care, employment, and recreation. (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2013, p. 11). This definition has since been amended to also exclude dementias and mental disorders due to a general medical condition (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2006).

The legal definition of serious mental illness is more flexible in that it may 1) vary by state, 2) include childhood diagnoses, and 3) exclude the necessity of functional impairment. Mental disorders typically meeting criteria for serious mental illness include schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, psychotic disorders, major depressive disorders, bipolar disorders, and borderline personality disorder. Anxiety disorders (such as obsessive compulsive disorder and panic disorder) or eating disorders (such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa) can also meet criteria for serious mental illness. Mental disorders causing significant impairment in children are typically referred to as *mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders* (O’Connell, Boat, & Warner, 2009); these should not be confused with *serious emotional disturbance*, or *emotional disturbance* (Mark & Buck, 2006), which specifically refer to disorders affecting academic learning and achievement.

Many mental health advocates and administrators point out that, although serious mental illness is most commonly associated with a particular set of disorders such as schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, bipolar disorder, or major depressive disorder; all mental illnesses

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have the potential to produce impairment, interfere with quality of life, or qualify as “serious” according to the federal usage of the term.

The following is a summary of terms related to serious mental illness that can be used interchangeably:

- affective disorders ≈ mood disorders
- bipolar disorders ≈ manic–depressive disorder/manic depression
- major depressive disorders ≈ major depression

The following terms are nested within other serious mental illness categories:

- affective disorders: depression, bipolar disorder, anxiety disorder
- anxiety disorders: panic disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder
- disruptive behavior disorders: conduct disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder
- eating disorders: bulimia nervosa, anorexia nervosa
- psychotic disorders: schizophrenia, delusional disorder, schizoaffective disorder, bipolar disorder with psychotic symptoms, depression with psychotic features

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