



Early Recognition and Effective Treatment of Early Serious Mental Illness

Finding and treating early serious mental illness promptly

Early recognition and effective treatment of early serious mental illness (ESMI) can be life changing, helping people with ESMI to avoid disability and fully participate in life.

Too often, treatment is delayed. In the case of psychotic disorders like schizophrenia, for example, it can take over a year from the time symptoms appear to when the young person receives appropriate care.

For other serious mental illnesses, it can take even longer to receive treatment—as many as 10 years following the first symptoms.

There is strong evidence that early detection and treatment can have a positive impact if mental health systems and providers work with the community to identify, engage, and serve individuals as soon as symptoms emerge.

SAMHSA

Substance Abuse and Mental Health
Services Administration



Mental illnesses are among the most disabling health challenges and are the predominant chronic diseases of young people

Serious mental illnesses are any diagnosable psychiatric condition that can result in significant disability. ESMI refers to the initial period of symptom onset.

Most mental illnesses start in adolescence or young adulthood and, if untreated, can lead to a lifetime decrease in quality of life and potential disability.

Early detection and treatment are especially important for schizophrenia, which frequently emerges just as youth are transitioning to adulthood. The length and severity of schizophrenia

can have a tremendous impact on the trajectory of an individual's life.

Given the importance of early detection and intervention, researchers have identified several approaches to identifying individuals with ESMI and engaging them in appropriate treatment—improving both symptoms and functioning. Examples of improved outcomes for individuals include independent living, fewer hospitalizations, greater likelihood of working or being in school, lowered justice system involvement, better quality of life, and reduced suicidality.

The most effective approaches involve targeted community outreach, appropriate screenings, and integrated services across settings and often use team-based care to wrap around individuals and their families, providing comprehensive and holistic supports.



Early detection

Effective early detection requires identifying youth and young adults in locations where they are typically found before they would normally access specialty mental health treatment.

- **Schools** are key. Teachers and other education professionals can be among the first to notice behavioral changes that may indicate a need for intervention. Properly conducted school-based screening is important for identifying emotional challenges such as anxiety and depression that may have few external signs or symptoms.
- **Pediatricians and other primary care providers** regularly see youth throughout their development and help parents ensure their children develop healthfully. Since mental health concerns are among the most common challenges to healthy development, primary care visits should include screenings to identify them.
- **People who work in justice system and child welfare settings** routinely encounter youth and young adults whose involvement in these systems can potentially be attributed to the effects of underlying behavioral health conditions. These situations present opportunities for early detection, diversion, and referral.
- **Crisis lines such as 988** can serve to both assist individuals in managing an acute crisis and help them to access additional services.
- **Public education regarding signs and symptoms of mental illness, and how to access help** can assist the general population in identifying problems early, reducing stigma, and connecting with services. Evidence-supported web-based screeners can help people understand their thoughts and feelings as well as provide guidance on next steps.

Mental health professionals should forge links among these resources and provide appropriate services within them to reduce the negative impacts of mental illnesses.

Programs that have been shown to identify early and support recovery



Collaborative Care

Most people with depression or anxiety are more likely to be seen by their primary care physician than by a mental health specialist. The collaborative care model was developed to treat common mental health challenges in primary care settings, involving the use of screening instruments and immediate access to a behavioral health specialist in the clinic. Backed by a consulting psychiatrist, the collaborative care team provides education, support, and/or medications and continues to measure patient progress. Individuals appropriate for this model generally improve with this approach. People who continue to experience challenges may need intensive specialty care.



Coordinated Specialty Care for Early Psychosis

With this approach, individuals experiencing a first episode of psychosis (FEP) are treated by a multidisciplinary team that ensures that their needs are met. The team includes mental health professionals, vocational and educational supports, family education and support, and care management. Teams often also include people who themselves have lived experience with a mental illness. The approach is centered around the individual's goals, needs, and preferences and meeting them at times and places that work for them. It is essential that both the individual and their identified family engage with the process. Several U.S. and international studies have shown that this approach produces superior outcomes to usual mental illness treatment, particularly for individuals with shorter durations of untreated psychosis.



School-Based Services

Researchers have shown that school-based services are effective in promoting overall health and well-being as well as improving academic performance. A comprehensive school program involves educating and supporting administrators and educators and effectively using school health personnel in strong partnerships with parents, students, and community mental health resources. A multitiered approach includes EBPs in each tier. This approach incorporates mental health promotion programming for all students, school-based treatment for students who have identified concerns, and a third tier that involves greater support for students with more significant problems. Interventions at all levels are integrated with other community resources as needed. These programs are developmentally appropriate, culturally responsive, and data driven.



Key features of successful early intervention services

Family and Caregiver Involvement

- Family members and caregivers can be important allies in early detection and intervention.
- Families and caregivers often know their loved one best and may have the most frequent contact with them. They can be the first to detect symptoms and assist in seeking help.
- Family psychoeducation can help to strengthen family relationships and assist in the design of strategies that facilitate communication and address conflict.
- When compared to individual psychotherapy alone, family/clinician partnerships result in fewer behavioral problems and greater skill acquisition.
- Family Peer Support Specialists can help family members and caregivers who are struggling with how best to support a loved one.

Youth/Young Adult Engagement

- Planners of early intervention programs should make the programs appealing to youth and young adults.
- Creators, implementers, and evaluators of programs should meaningfully involve youth and young adults in all aspects of program development, delivery, and evaluation.
- Professionals who plan and staff drop-in resource centers and other programs for youth should make sure that youth and young adults have easy access to these resources to promote engagement. Any treatment planning should be person-centered.
- Peer and self-help groups can offer mutual support and provide opportunities to develop friendships and contribute to the well-being of others.
- Video games can be appealing to youth and young adults, and specially designed software may promote cognitive function and mood. “Gamification” of service structure is a promising practice for youth engagement.





Policy and funding considerations

Collaborative care programs reimburse for screening, care coordination, and psychiatric consultation.

Typically, coordinated specialty care is financed through a mixture of insurance payments, federal mental health block grant funds, and state and local general revenue.

Local district resources, state funds, federal or other grant funds, insurance payments for school-based treatment, and other braided funding sources can support school-based services.

Continuing education can require staff training in early identification and support. In addition, as in the Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinic (CCBHC) model, reimbursement can require this type of training.

Resources for ESMI information, training, and technical assistance

[SAMHSA's National Training and Technical Assistance Center for Early Serious Mental Illness](#)

[Stanford Medicine's Psychosis-Risk and Early Psychosis Program Network \(PEPPNET\)](#)

[National Institute of Mental Health's Early Psychosis Intervention Network \(EPINET\)](#)

[University of Maryland School of Medicine's National Center for School Mental Health \(NCSMH\)](#)

[University of Washington Advancing Integrated Mental Health Solutions \(AIMS\) Center's Collaborative Care Model](#)

[Mental Health Technology Transfer Centers](#)

[NASMHPD Early Intervention in Psychosis Virtual Resource Center](#)

[National Training and Technical Assistance Center for Child, Youth, and Family Mental Health \(NT-TAC\) | SAMHSA](#)

[SAMHSA's Early Serious Mental Illness \(ESMI\) Treatment Locator](#)

[SAMHSA's Project AWARE Project AWARE \(Advancing Wellness and Resilience in Education\)](#)

For more information, contact: SAMHSAStateTA@jbsinternational.com

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Division of State and Community Systems Development, Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 5600 Fishers Lane, Rockville, MD 20857.

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SAMHSA's mission is to lead public health and service delivery efforts that promote mental health, prevent substance misuse, and provide treatments and supports to foster recovery while ensuring equitable access and better outcomes.

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