

from the field of gerontological social work practice

GERIATRIC MENTAL HEALTH: *BEHIND THE LABEL*

What do you think of when you hear or read “geriatric mental health?” Most of us think of diagnostic categories: depression and anxiety, substance abuse and hoarding, schizophrenia, bi-polar disorder, or dementia.

Yet behind each label are older adults whose mental health problems often involve a mix of personal, developmental, and environmental issues. They may be struggling with ill health and disability, unrelenting pain, increased dependence, upcoming transitions, unresolved childhood conflicts, living conditions such as poverty or social isolation, caring for an ailing partner or dependent adult child, and conflicts within the extended family.

Thankfully, anxiety can be quelled and depression lifted by psychotropic medications, but more is needed to help the older person face long standing challenges as well as those of late life. And the clinical social worker has a unique role to play on the mental health team. With a commitment to the time honored mission of social work - a dual emphasis on the person and the situation - the social worker can harness the power of the worker-client relationship to strengthen the client’s coping abilities while garnering needed resources.

A few cases:

A widow depressed over her own ill health and increased dependence and anxious about the future of a developmentally disabled daughter whom she has protected over the years. Here, the social worker may help the mother address the guilt she has been experiencing and at the same time work with her to plan for the daughter’s future.

A wife who is overwhelmed, anxious and unable to function because the husband who always handled the finances and driving has lost his vision and is no longer able to do so. Here the social worker may provide the emotional support and encouragement the wife needs to assume a different role in her marriage and at the same time arrange for vision rehabilitation services for the husband.

A divorced man who is clinically depressed following the diagnosis of a serious medical condition and the realization that the adult children he could turn to for support have become estranged over the years. Here the social worker - as part of a mental health team - may help the client with the concrete aspects of dealing with his health situation, and exploring ways in which family ties can be rekindled.

We look forward to your comments and experiences.

SBW Partners is a fee-for-service firm devoted to advancing social work practice in aging. Services are provided by Dr. Barbara Silverstone and Dr. Ann Burack-Weiss, the firm’s founding partners, and a group of associates. We provide consultation and staff development for agencies, supervision for practitioners and corporate training programs. For more information, please visit www.sbwpartners.com or call 212.337.2555.