



How to Talk About the COVID-19 Vaccines with Individuals Who Have Serious Mental Illness (SMI)

A Brief Guide for Mental Health Clinicians

GRANT STATEMENT

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic presents health and mortality risks for individuals who have serious mental illness (SMI). Recent data show that people who have schizophrenia are nearly three times more likely to die from COVID-19.¹ Only age presents a bigger risk factor.



Opportunity

The rollout of vaccines for COVID-19 presents an opportunity to protect the health of individuals who have SMI. There are many calls to action to prioritize this population and get them vaccinated.^{2,3,4}

Challenge

Individuals who have SMI may have concerns, questions, or fears about the COVID-19 vaccines. They may feel hesitant about vaccines and even think the vaccine itself can cause the illness.⁴ Plus, it may be hard for individuals and family members to find and understand information about these vaccines. Articles or details they come across may be complex and not presented with health literacy in mind.

Solution

As a mental health clinician, you play a critical role in helping individuals who have SMI understand and navigate health-related decisions. That is why you should initiate a talk about the COVID-19 vaccines. Much like other health-related questions, screens, or topics, you can use a shared decision-making approach to guide the talk. Especially with this population, it is important to present and discuss the risks, benefits, and alternatives. This helps individuals make informed decisions with evidence-based information.

This guide provides simple tips for mental health clinicians on how to talk about the COVID-19 vaccines with individuals who have SMI.

Consider the Risk Factors

It is critical to think about each individual and how to best support them. Assess their risk levels for COVID-19 and consider what factors may impact their thoughts on the COVID-19 vaccine. This provides helpful background that can facilitate a conversation as part of a shared decision-making process.

Background, Cultural, Psychological

What factors are present that may impact their perceptions of the COVID-19 vaccines, such as:

- ✓ Already had COVID-19
- ✓ Knowledge of potential vaccine side effects
- ✓ Mental health symptoms (cognition, paranoia, delusional thinking, impaired decision making)
- ✓ Race/Ethnicity
- ✓ Religious beliefs

Health

How is their risk level for COVID-19 affected by:

- ✓ Age
- ✓ Cancer history
- ✓ Cardiovascular conditions
- ✓ Gender
- ✓ Obesity
- ✓ Smoking

Hesitancy

Are they hesitant or concerned about the COVID-19 vaccine due to:

- ✓ Allergies
- ✓ Preexisting medical conditions
- ✓ Pregnancy

Lifestyle

How many people do they come into contact with via:

- ✓ Employment
- ✓ High-risk settings
- ✓ School
- ✓ Social activities



Motivational Interviewing Framework to Guide the Conversation

After you consider the risk factors, you can use motivational interviewing to guide the conversation. This approach is helpful to maintain the therapeutic relationship and provide person-centered care. You can choose how to frame the discussion based on each individual's context and any risk factors you identify.

Two approaches that may be helpful are **Elicit Provide Elicit** and **Dancing With Discord**.

Elicit Provide Elicit

This is a respectful way to share information. It determines what an individual already knows about a topic and maintains a two-way conversation to avoid the perception of a lecture. You evoke their existing knowledge about a topic and then their thoughts on any details you share.

ELICIT

Ask what they know about a topic:
"What do you know about the COVID-19 vaccine?"

Response may be:
"I heard that I should take it. But I also heard that we don't really know if it works."

PROVIDE

Offer clear feedback that builds on what the person says:
"So you know that you should get the vaccine, but you are also unsure about whether it is effective. I can tell you that all the current vaccines are very effective in the prevention of COVID-19. They can also prevent serious illness even if you do get COVID-19."

ELICIT

Ask a follow up question:
"What do you think about the information that I just shared?"

Dancing with Discord

This approach helps you avoid the natural impulse to rebut or debate. It is especially useful if an individual expresses hesitancy or concerns around the vaccine.

Shift Focus

Do not side step contentious issues. Instead, validate the individual's experience and ask for clarification.

Individual: *"I just do not think there is any point in getting the vaccine."*

Clinician: *"You are not sure about the efficacy of the vaccine. What do you know about it?"*

Come Alongside

This allows you to align with the individual. It demonstrates empathy and support and invites the person to modify their original statement or agree with it.

Individual: *"I just do not trust this vaccine yet."*

Clinician: *"Having trust is important. It sounds like you have not heard anything that gives you that trust yet."*

Emphasize Personal Choice and Control

Individuals ultimately have the choice to take action or not. Support their choice and autonomy.

Individual: *"I know my doctor says I should get the vaccine, but I do not know what I want to do."*

Clinician: *"Your doctor may have reasons to recommend the vaccine, but it is your decision. What do you think would be helpful for you in order to make this decision?"*

Agreement with a Twist

This is a technique that combines a reflection with a reframe. It confirms that they are being heard and then offers another perspective.

Individual: *"I know that I am supposed to get the vaccine, but I am just not sure about the long-term effects."*

Clinician: *"I hear others express concern about long-term side effects, but it seems like you are considering it. Maybe you just need more information about its safety."*

Additional Resources

Use these evidence-based resources to inform your conversations.

COVID-19 Vaccine

- ✓ [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)
- ✓ [U.S. Food and Drug Administration](#)
- ✓ [World Health Organization](#)

Motivational Interviewing

- ✓ [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#)
- ✓ [Motivational Interviewing Network of Trainers](#)
- ✓ [Psychology Today](#)
- ✓ [SMI Adviser Knowledge Base](#)

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Sources

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