

Perceptions of Severe Mental Illness Compared to Other Common Complex Disorders among Family Members of Affected Individuals

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Studies addressing patient perspectives of family history for common complex disease largely focus on diabetes, heart disease, and cancer. Mental illnesses are an important group of common complex disorders that are not often included in these studies. This study aimed to explore whether individuals who have both a family history of serious mental illness (schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, bipolar disorder) and a family history of another common complex disease (diabetes, heart disease, cancer) perceive 1) family history, 2) severity of disease, 3) impact of disease on the family, and 4) controllability of serious mental illness and common complex physical disease differently. We used a descriptive qualitative approach, and conducted semi-structured interviews with individuals who had both a first-degree relative with serious mental illness and a first-degree relative with a common complex physical disorder. The interviews were transcribed, and the transcripts were subjected to thematic analysis. This study confirmed and extended previous findings in the literature and demonstrated key differences that a diagnosis of serious mental illness has on an individual and a family. Specifically, the participants discussed family history and controllability of serious mental illness and common physical disorders similarly. However, the participants discussed the severity and impact on the family between serious mental illness and common physical disorders differently, namely that serious mental illness is more severe and has a greater impact on the family than diabetes, heart disease, or cancer. While genetic counseling for both mental and physical common complex disorders indicates the same basic discussion of multifactorial inheritance and appropriate recurrence risks, the family experience with each of these types of illnesses may be significantly different. Key findings from this study may be used to assist in providing appropriate counseling and psychosocial support to those with a family history of serious mental illness who seek genetic counseling.