

SMI Caregiver Academy (SMICA)

Knowledge - Insight - Empathy - Healing

A non-profit dedicated to helping Caregivers improve
their relationship with their Loved Ones

Practical, Actionable Tools and Best Practices for Caregivers

For Better or Worse: The Critical Role of Caregivers in SMI Recovery

A SMI Caregiver Academy Whitepaper



Summary: Caregivers have a CRITICAL role in affecting the recovery of a family Loved One who has a brain neurochemistry illness (bipolar, schizophrenia, schizoaffective). Research repeated over the last 30 years has shown that the probability of psychiatric re-hospitalization can be reduced by 77% if family Caregivers (parents, spouses, partners, siblings, grandparents) receive the proper training.

SMI Caregiver training is the least expensive, fastest, most effective treatment in increasing the probability of better health outcomes for Loved Ones, families, and society as a whole.

Making Things Better or Making Things Worse: The Critical Role of Caregivers

SMI Caregiver Academy (SMICA) Position Paper

Michael Uram, Chief Education Officer

There are **HUGE GAPS** in providing effective mental illness care for those who have a schizophrenia-spectrum illness. Our mental health care "system" is so broken that many believe that the "brokenness" is by design. Just consider:

- Dramatically too few psychiatric beds in hospitals
- Too few practicing psychiatrists in the US
- Misinformed civil libertarians not understanding SMIs, demanding people "die with their rights on"
- Outdated "old-wives-tales" about "cold mothers" and "poor character training by parents"
- Federally-mandated limits on psychiatric hospital stays for those on Medicaid (IMD Exclusion)
- Out-of-date medical information and training about the most effective antipsychotic – clozapine
- Three largest US "mental illness care facilities" - LA County Jail, Rikers Island, Cook County Jail
- Lack of education for caregivers (primarily parents and spouses) responsible for LO's daily care

Ironically, this last one is the easiest AND least expensive to fix.

NO ONE – not psychiatrists, psychiatric nurse practitioners, family doctors, hospitals, therapists, colleges, social workers, case managers – **NO ONE** provides critically-important training to those who **bear the brunt of care** for those with SMIs – caregivers (parents, spouses, partners, siblings, grandparents, etc.).

Caregivers, without any understanding about the basics of brain neurochemistry and how these illnesses affect cognition, memory, behavior, emotional regulation, and physical health – often **MAKE THINGS WORSE** for their Loved Ones and themselves:

- Increase stress and tension at home – triggering more frequent and severe episodes
- Blame their Loved Ones for "bad behavior" when in fact, brain neurochemistry is the driver
- Kick their Loved Ones out to the streets – homelessness, addiction, crime, prostitution
- Leave their Loved Ones to seek the most available relief – self-medication (alcohol, MJ, opiates)
- Break families apart – depriving their Loved One of their MOST critical need – "human connection"

For seven years, the SMI Caregiver Academy (SMICA), a 501c3 non-profit, has been sharing with parents, spouses, partners, and family members basic brain neurochemistry education, tools, and best practices to help Caregivers be as supportive, loving, and effective caregivers as possible for their Loved Ones who have a Schizophrenia-Spectrum Illness.

SMICA offers free 12-week sessions, entitled "Love Can't Fix Serious Mental Illness", to caregivers and families via the internet. Caregivers from the Americas, Europe, Asia, and Africa have participated to near-universal acclaim.

While the sessions are evidence-based, it is NOT a medical class, nor is it therapy. SMICA's approach is aligned with guidance from neuroscientists, psychiatrists, and psychologists. The sessions are **BY** caregivers **FOR** caregivers, focused explicitly on SMI Caregiving challenges and best practices.

Caregivers are not doctors or therapists and **their Loved Ones actually need them NOT TO BE**. What Loved Ones **desperately need** from their family is understanding, empathy, acceptance, support, and for their family members to be their **BIGGEST ADVOCATES** – believing in them, cherishing them, unconditionally and unyieldingly loving them. This is the core philosophy of SMICA's approach.

For more than 30 years*, research conducted with families with Loved Ones with BiPolar and/or Schizophrenia, has shown that:

- **Loved Ones who have Caregivers:**

- who have a basic understanding of brain neurochemistry (PFC, amygdala, hippocampus) and how SMIs affect:
 - cognition, processing speed, short term memory, insight, perception
 - emotional regulation
 - ethical and moral judgment
 - mood, energy, and physical health and
- who exercise HIGH EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

have a **less profound course of illness with faster Meaningful Recovery**

compared to:

- **Loved Ones who have Caregivers with NO understanding of:**

- the brain neurochemistry of SMIs and how SMIs affect:
- the cause of their Loved Ones' behavior (it's not "willful" and "poor character")
- their Loved One's emotional dysregulation and instability (it's not about "us")
- their Loved One's poor judgment (it's not "moral failure"),
- their Loved One's cognitive processing speed (they're not "stupid")
- their Loved One's short-term memory impairment (they are NOT ignoring us)
- their Loved One's diminished physical health and energy (it's not laziness)
- how SMIs negatively affect diet choices (it's not about "will power")

those Loved Ones have **MORE frequent hospitalizations, a worse course of illness, and a slower Meaningful Recovery, if at all.**

The SMI Caregiver Academy offers their 12-week Caregiver Class, via the internet, to members of caregiver support groups and organizations. **No medical, meds, or therapy advice is given during the course.** The sessions teach the basics of brain neurochemistry, how SMIs affect brain neurochemistry, and numerous tools to help Caregivers provide more effective, more loving support for their Loved Ones.

Beginning in 2026, IOP and PHP programs, clinicians, hospitals, mental-health case managers and social workers can partner with SMICA to co-present the "Love Can't Fix Serious Mental Illness" sessions to families and caregivers, using SMICA's **NEAREST** Methodology. SMICA proactively works with partners to validate the approach and material and modify it, as needed, to meet local needs and perspectives. SMICA is headquartered in Chicago.

To inquire, contact:

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About the Author: Michael Uram is a retired educator and 20+ year caregiver for two adults who have a schizophrenia-spectrum illness. He is lead admin of the BiPolar SMI Family Education and Advocacy Support Group for caregivers on Facebook which has 5,600 families as members. You can follow Michael's work at: patreon.com/SMICaregiver & Caregiver Q&A: AskSMICA@SMICaregiverAcademy.com

*<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/27471055/> Family-Focused Therapy for Bipolar Disorder: Reflections on 30 Years of Research

*<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4288308/> The role of family therapy in the management of schizophrenia: challenges and solutions

*<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0271503521004275> Family interventions for relapse prevention in schizophrenia: a systematic review and network meta-analysis