People with severe mental disorders (SMDs) have a higher mortality rate and reduced life expectancy compared to the general population. Factors that contribute to higher mortality rates include a higher rate of smoking and increased incidence of obesity from lifestyle, diet, or medication side effects. Cancer treatment may exacerbate mood and psychotic symptoms in patients with SMD. Some of the medications used in cancer treatment or the medications used to alleviate the side effects of cancer treatment can have adverse reactions with psychotropic medications. This article examines problems that patients with SMD encounter with their cancer diagnosis and treatment. Oncology nurses in any clinical setting play a pivotal role in identifying the special needs of a patient with SMD and must become familiar with psychosocial issues, psychotropic medications, and SMD to educate and advocate for these patients and their families. Collaborating and coordinating care between oncology and psychiatry providers is needed for optimal patient outcomes.

## Major Depressive Disorder

Major depressive disorder affects about 14.8 million adults in the United States and is the leading cause of disability in the country (World Health Organization, 2008). According to the American Psychiatric Association ([APA], 2000), people with major depressive illness experience at least five or more of the signs of depression, such as depressed mood, loss of interest or pleasure in activities, changes in appetite or weight, changes in sleep patterns, fatigue, difficulty concentrating, and suicide ideation. Major depressive disorder is a chronic illness that can require ongoing treatment and management.

### Preexisting Depression

People with depression may experience significant improvements in their mental health after undergoing treatment for their SMD. However, it is important for oncology nurses to be aware of the risks and challenges associated with managing depression in patients with SMD. For example, patients with SMD may be more likely to experience side effects from medications used to treat depression, such as increased risk of suicide. It is also important for oncology nurses to be aware of the potential for antidepressants to interact with other medications used to treat SMD.

### Psychotic Depression

Psychotic depression is a subtype of major depressive disorder characterized by the presence of psychotic symptoms, such as delusions or hallucinations. Patients with psychotic depression may experience more severe symptoms and require additional treatment, including antipsychotic medications.

### Manic Depressive Disorder

Manic depressive disorder is a mood disorder characterized by alternating periods of mania and depression. Patients with manic depressive disorder may experience extreme mood swings, increased energy, and/or decreased need for sleep. It is important for oncology nurses to be aware of the potential for medications used to treat manic depressive disorder to interact with other medications used to treat SMD.

### Bipolar Disorder

Bipolar disorder is a mood disorder characterized by extreme mood swings and periods of mania and depression. Patients with bipolar disorder may experience periods of increased energy, decreased need for sleep, and/or other symptoms of mania. It is important for oncology nurses to be aware of the potential for medications used to treat bipolar disorder to interact with other medications used to treat SMD.

### Schizophrenia

Schizophrenia is a serious mental disorder characterized by hallucinations, delusions, and disorganized thinking. Patients with schizophrenia may experience significant social and occupational functioning and require ongoing treatment, including medications to manage symptoms. It is important for oncology nurses to be aware of the potential for medications used to treat schizophrenia to interact with other medications used to treat SMD.

### Suicide Risk

Patients with severe mental disorders may be at increased risk for suicide. Oncology nurses should be aware of suicide risk factors and take appropriate precautions, such as monitoring patients for signs of suicidal ideation and offering counseling and support.

### Nursing Interventions

Oncology nurses can play a crucial role in caring for patients with SMD. Some nursing interventions that may be helpful include:

- Assessing patients for signs of depression, psychosis, or bipolar disorder
- Educating patients and their families about the symptoms and treatment options for SMD
- Collaborating with psychiatry providers to ensure effective care
- Providing emotional support and encouragement
- Encouraging patients to participate in physical activity and other healthy behaviors
- Monitoring for side effects of medications and other treatments

By understanding the unique challenges associated with caring for patients with SMD, oncology nurses can provide effective and compassionate care that promotes physical and mental health.