



*Canadian Psychiatric
Research Foundation*

When Something's Wr ng

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Ideas for Families

Schizophrenia

Schizophrenia



Schizophrenia

Schizophrenia is a brain disorder that is characterized by disturbances in perception and disorganization in thinking and behaviour. Those with schizophrenia often experience symptoms such as hearing voices and paranoid or unusual thoughts. This disorder has nothing to do with a split or multiple personality, which is a common misperception.

Schizophrenia is a complex disorder that shows itself in many different forms and its outcome varies depending on the severity of the illness, the rapidity of diagnosis and the effectiveness of the treatments used. It is comprised of two groups of symptoms: negative (such as social withdrawal, apathy, emotional unresponsiveness) and positive (such as delusions, hallucinations, bizarre behaviour). In the past, it was thought that having schizophrenia meant a lifetime of disability, but current thinking and research show that many with this disorder may have very good long-term outcomes.

Schizophrenia affects about one per cent of the population. This prevalence appears to be the same across countries, cultures,

and socioeconomic groups. The disorder usually begins in the adolescent or early adult years and is slightly more common in males than in females. The causes of the disorder are a topic of ongoing research. Current evidence indicates that genetic factors are the most important, but that non-genetic factors such as drug abuse, childhood head injury and infection during a mother's pregnancy (e.g., the influenza virus) can also play a part in the development of schizophrenia.

Schizophrenia typically develops gradually over a number of years, but in some situations can develop quite rapidly. Usually, the "negative" symptoms start to show first, which include apathy, depression, and social withdrawal. In the later stages, the "positive" symptoms, such as delusions, illogical thinking and hallucinations, develop. There is good reason to believe that identifying and diagnosing schizophrenia in its early stages improves outcomes and greatly limits the degree of disability that develops.

Recovering from schizophrenia involves a comprehensive treatment approach. Anti-psychotic medications help to manage symptoms (e.g., hallucinations), and various social therapies help with re-integration back into normal activities of life, since those with schizophrenia often withdraw from regular activities (e.g., school, work, relationships). Both aspects of treatment are key to managing this disorder.

A diagnosis from a qualified health practitioner (e.g., psychiatrist) is always important if you are seeing symptoms that suggest something might be wrong. The symptoms of schizophrenia can be similar to other disorders such as depression and bipolar affective disorder (see *Mood Disorders* in this handbook). There are other medical illnesses, such as epilepsy, that can also cause some of these types of symptoms, as well as a number of drugs of abuse, such as marijuana and cocaine, which can cause some of these symptoms. Therefore, it is important to obtain a proper diagnosis, since similar symptoms can be seen across a number of disorders.

It is important to note that schizophrenia is associated

with a high risk of suicide; studies suggest that 10-15% of individuals with schizophrenia will take their own lives and this is most likely to occur in the early years of the illness (see *Suicide* section in this handbook). There is good reason to believe that with aggressive and comprehensive treatment, the rate of suicide can be dramatically reduced.

Schizophrenia

Behaviour Characteristics

Early stages:

- ❑ Difficulty concentrating
- ❑ Trouble with sleeping, sleeping at odd hours, reversal of day/night activity cycle
- ❑ Difficulty relaxing, fearful, unrealistic worries
- ❑ Decrease in school performance
- ❑ Decrease in personal hygiene and grooming
- ❑ Difficulty relating to others
- ❑ Social isolation or withdrawal
- ❑ Suicidal ideas, thoughts of ending one's life
- ❑ Showing no emotion, speaking rarely, sitting still for long periods of time
- ❑ Preoccupation with unusual ideas or philosophies
- ❑ Over-elaborative speech and disorganized thinking
- ❑ Denying that anything might be wrong

Coping Strategies

- **Early intervention** is key to managing the disorder and preventing further disability.
- **Get help** from a qualified health practitioner, including a professional diagnosis. An accurate diagnosis will help to prevent any incorrect “labeling” of your child by others.
- **Obtain** a second opinion if possible.
- **Find** a support group for both you and your child, and exchange strategies.
- **Learn** all you can about the disorder and educate your family and your child about the disorder.
- **Don't compare** your child to siblings or other children. Treat your child as a unique individual.
- **Re-evaluate** and modify strategies as necessary. Work closely with your child's teacher, doctor, and school team.
- **See** *Managing Problem Behaviour in Children, Working with Your Health Practitioner, and Resources* in this handbook for more information.
- If schizophrenia runs in the family, be aware of early signs and symptoms of the disorder and seek professional help as soon as possible.

Behaviour Characteristics

Coping Strategies

Later stages:

- ❑ Hallucinations – hearing voices that make insults or give commands; some people will also have visions or unusual body sensations
- ❑ Delusions – false beliefs that are usually suspicious or paranoid in their content (e.g., “Someone is spying on me,” “listening to my thoughts,” or “putting thoughts in my mind”)
- ❑ Disordered thinking – illogical, strange associations between thoughts; abrupt shifts from one topic to another
- ❑ Peculiar or bizarre behaviours, like talking to oneself; lack of social understanding
- ❑ Odd speech, inappropriate expression of emotion (e.g., laughing at sad events)

- Family member support plays an important role in managing schizophrenia. Show as much support and patience for your child as possible during this difficult time. Discuss how each family member might contribute in specific ways to supporting your child through the recovery process.
- Try not to take your child’s negative behaviour personally, such as apathy or laziness. He/she is behaving this way due to a brain disorder, not by choice. Remember that symptoms should improve over time.
- People with schizophrenia have problems processing complex information. Your child will need help in understanding his/her disorder. Present a clear message to your child of what the disorder is and the treatment that his/her doctor has recommended. Family support of the doctor’s treatment plan is also important to the success of your child’s recovery.
- In general, communicate with your child in brief, clear sentences. Give instructions one at a time.

Coping Strategies

- Don't isolate your family or your child from others. It is very important to continue with daily activities and to maintain regular relationships and connections. Discuss with your family how each of you will respond to others who ask what's wrong.
- If your child expresses thoughts that are distorted or delusional, don't try to disprove them. Make a calm statement of disagreement and then back off. Appealing to reason and logic will not be productive with this disorder. Do not, however, "play along" with the ideas or "humour" your child by agreeing with him/her.
- Recognize your child's need, at times, to withdraw and be alone when he/she is feeling unwell. Provide a quiet place for this purpose.
- Encourage and find enjoyable recreational activities for your child outside of school and work. Allow opportunities for your child to be with others in safe, friendly, non-stressful settings.

Coping Strategies

- Allow your child as much responsibility and independence as possible. However, your child may need help in some areas, such as with money matters and living space.
- There are times that suicidal behaviour and/or violence may occur. It is especially important at these times to seek urgent medical intervention.
- Take advantage of any educational programs offered by hospitals on schizophrenia. Many hospitals do offer these programs.
- Connect with your local chapter of the Schizophrenia Society of Canada for additional information and support.

Schizophrenia: Treatment and Resources

TREATMENT

The treatment of schizophrenia requires a range of interventions. Symptoms of schizophrenia generally respond well to anti-psychotic medications, and there are many different ones available in Canada. The majority of people with schizophrenia will improve greatly with the appropriate medication and many will find their hallucinations and delusions subside significantly. Many of these medications will help improve negative symptoms as well, making it more likely for patients to benefit from social therapies. It is also necessary and important for people to stay on their medication in order to prevent the return of symptoms once they recover from an acute phase. Extensive research to create better, long-acting medicines is ongoing (e.g., new long-acting atypical medications that are injected into the body are now available).

Recovery from schizophrenia also requires interventions to help people return to school or work and get re-involved with friends and family. Social therapies are especially important in helping to bring about recovery in these areas.

The best approach to recovering from schizophrenia includes taking medication, attending social therapies, and leading a healthy lifestyle, including effective stress management activities, eating a proper diet, and exercising regularly.

Schizophrenia

RESOURCES

National Alliance for Research on Schizophrenia and Depression (NARSAD)

60 Cutter Mill Road, Suite 404

Great Neck, NY 11021

Phone: (516) 829-0091

Toll-Free: 1-800-829-8289

E-mail: info@narsad.org

Web: www.narsad.org

Schizophrenia.com

(An online, not-for-profit information, support and education centre)

Web: www.schizophrenia.com

Schizophrenia Society of Canada

50 Acadia Avenue, Suite 205

Markham, ON L3R 0B3

Phone: (905) 415-2007

Toll-free: 1-888-SSC-HOPE (1-888-772-4673)

Web: www.schizophrenia.ca

(Also able to direct you to further resources in your province or community)

Please also see *Resources* in the back of this handbook.

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