

SCHIZOPHRENIA

Schizophrenia is a brain disease. A complex, extremely puzzling condition, it is the most common caronic, disabling and least understood of the major mental illness.

Causes

Scientists do not agree on what causes schizophrenia, but do agree that many factors contribute to its development.

Biochemical imbalance. Some people with schizophrenia have abnormal chemicals or levels of chemicals in their bodies; basic knowledge about brain chemistry and its link to schizophrenia is expanding rapidly and this area of research is very active.

Heredity. Schizophrenia runs in families, and children of schizophrenic parents are more likely to develop the disease.

Environment. Genetic factors produce a vulnerability to schizophrenia and environment factors contribute to different degrees in different individuals.

Family relations. Parents do not cause schizophrenia, but some studies suggest that certain family environments leave children ill-equipped to deal with complex, changing or stressful situations.

Birth defects. Certain complications during pregnancy or birth may increase the likelihood of a child becoming schizophrenic.

Symptoms

The common notion that schizophrenia is the same as "split personality"- a Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde- is not accurate. Multiple personality is an entirely different disorder that is really quite rare.

Most people occasionally experience some of the following symptoms, but for people with schizophrenia they are severe and persistent.

Unusual realities- viewing the world differently and, because of this, often feeling anxious and confused or distant, detached or preoccupied.

Hallucinations - sensing things that do not exist; hearing voices and seeing people or objects that are not there or feeling invisible fingers touching their bodies.

Delusions - persistent false beliefs, feelings of being cheated, harassed, poisoned or conspired against.

Disordered thinking - not thinking straight, inability to concentrate or make logical connections, jumping from topic to topic.

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Inappropriate emotional expression - showing inappropriate emotions or no emotions at all, exhibiting prolonged elation or depression, laughing at something sad.

Fear - inability to control threatening thoughts or ideas.

Isolation - withdrawal from others, being absorbed by internal thoughts and feelings, threatening suicide.

Treatment

Although no totally effective therapy has yet been devised, many schizophrenic patients improve enough to lead independent, satisfying lives. Although not curable, it is an eminently treatable disease.

Antipsychotic drugs. Tranquilizers and antidepressants do not cure schizophrenia, but reduce the psychotic symptoms and provide a substantial improvement in a large majority of schizophrenic patients.

Psychotherapy. By talking in group, family or individual therapy or self-help groups, focusing on past problems, experiences, thoughts, feelings or relationships, patients may come to understand themselves and their problems and learn to sort out the real from the unreal.

Out-patient therapy, partial hospitalization, in-patient hospitalization and residential care. Provide relief from stressful situations, provide a protective atmosphere, allow for adjustment of medications and reduce pressure on the family and allow for a level of independence.

Some people have only one psychotic episode; others may have many episodes during a lifetime, but lead relatively normal lives during the interim periods. Those individuals with chronic (continuous or recurring) schizophrenia often do not fully recover normal functioning and typically require long-term treatment.

Some chronic schizophrenic patients may never be able to function without assistance. They need community support services such as transitional employment and housing, basic living skills training and psychosocial clubhouse services.



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Behave toward a schizophrenic person naturally and simply and with the respect due another human being.

Learn the facts about mental illness. Myths and misunderstandings only add to the problem.

Understand that people with schizophrenia have the same hopes, needs and fears as you.

People with schizophrenia are no more violent than other people. They rarely are a danger to others, and even during acute illness, they're more likely to hurt themselves than others.

People with schizophrenia like to be around others, but they also need time and space to be alone quietly. An atmosphere of calm and confidence is important to them.

Offer your time, support and money to help find causes of and better treatment for schizophrenia and to improve community support services.

Source: Information taken from National Institute of Mental Health materials.