



CANADIAN MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION
L'ASSOCIATION CANADIENNE POUR LA SANTÉ MENTALE
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Fact Sheet

SCHIZOPHRENIA

Although this Fact Sheet was created with input from consumers of mental health services, psychologists and psychiatrists, the information is of a general nature. More comprehensive information can be obtained from libraries, including Ontario Division, and your local CMHA branch.

Because schizophrenia is a complex condition that affects how people behave, it is poorly understood and greatly feared. Unfortunately it has created negative attitudes and confusion about individuals with this mental illness. The effects of the stigma attached to being mentally ill, being shunned by society, possibly being abandoned by friends and loved ones, can be devastating. Everyone needs to feel valuable and worthy, and finding positive support and encouragement from family and friends can give a person the strength to help conquer mental illness.

WHAT IS SCHIZOPHRENIA?

Schizophrenia is a puzzling and serious mental disorder. It varies in severity and duration and interferes with a person's ability to think and feel. It usually involves a loss of touch with reality and people with schizophrenia have a difficult time distinguishing between what is fantasy and what is real in their lives because everything seems real. Contrary to popular belief, schizophrenia is not a "split personality".

WHAT CAUSES SCHIZOPHRENIA?

The precise cause of this complex condition is still something of a mystery. Many theories have been advanced, but are unproven as yet, including changes in the chemistry of the brain, changes in the structure of the brain, and possible genetic factors. Schizophrenia often appears when the body is undergoing hormonal and physical changes in adolescence.

HOW MANY PEOPLE ARE AFFECTED?

Schizophrenia is more common than most people think. It usually strikes the 15-30 age group and has been described as one of youth's greatest disablers. One in 100 people will develop schizophrenia in their lifetime. Approximately 46,000 people in Ontario have schizophrenia.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

Schizophrenia varies greatly from person to person, but many involve hearing voices, delusions of grandeur and power (false beliefs), incoherent speech, paranoia (distrust, fear, suspicion) and hallucinations (seeing/hearing things that are not there) which are convincing and disturbing to the individual.

Symptoms may first appear as more puzzling than serious. Individuals may find themselves losing the ability to relax, concentrate or sleep, they may be moody or withdrawn. Personal appearance, work, or school may begin to decline.

The majority of people suffering from schizophrenia are not violent. Schizophrenia can sometimes produce bizarre behaviour and is often interpreted as involving violent behaviour. In truth, incidence of violence is extremely low, and when it does occur often stems from fear.

WHAT ARE THE TREATMENTS?

As yet, there is no known cure. Research on schizophrenia continues with the main thrust on discovering why the chemical processes of the brain fail to function properly. Main researchers theorize that overproduction of dopamine, a transmitting substance in the brain, or an over-sensitivity to it, may have something to do with the illness.

Improved medication and treatment, community support and understanding and love and support from friends and family, allow many persons with schizophrenia to function in the community. Supportive psychotherapy is the basis of rehabilitation programs which can mean a lot to the individuals with schizophrenia and their loved ones. Whatever the recommended treatment, it is important to be well informed.

WHERE CAN I GO FOR HELP?

Remember you are not alone. Reaching out for help and knowing where to go for positive support is very important. You may want to contact your family physician, or your local branch of the Canadian Mental Health Association for information and referrals.