

Schizophrenia

Just as physical illnesses can take many forms, so too do mental illnesses. Mental illnesses are still feared and misunderstood by many people in our society right now because many don't know enough about them. It is the "fear of the unknown." This fear will disappear as we take the time to learn more about mental illnesses-its causes, effects on people's lives, and treatments. It is very encouraging to know that all mental illnesses can be treated.

Schizophrenia affects about 1% of Canadians. Contrary to what many people think, schizophrenia is not a "split personality." The most common symptoms of this illness include: bizarre behaviour delusions (false or irrational beliefs), hallucinations (seeing or hearing things which do not exist), mixed-up thoughts, lack of motivation, and social withdrawal.

The symptoms of schizophrenia often develop slowly, for most, between the ages of 16 and 30 years. In the early stages, people with this mental illness may find themselves losing the ability to concentrate, sleep, and relax. They may start to shut friends out of their lives; their school and work begins to suffer; along with their personal appearance. During this time, there may be episodes where the individual may start having unusual perceptions and/or talk in ways that may be difficult to understand.

Some people only have one episode of very severe symptoms (psychosis), while others have many episodes throughout their lives but manage to live relatively normally between their episodes of psychosis. Some people, however, are continuously disabled by this mental illness. In general, once it has taken hold, schizophrenia tends to appear in cycles of remission and relapse. When in remission, a person may seem able to more or less function in society. However, during relapses, people with schizophrenia may experience one or all of the symptoms of this illness.

Disorganized thinking can make those with schizophrenia feel all mixed up and this may be apparent in their conversations when they may jump from one unrelated topic to another. It is not uncommon for anxiety and depression to accompany these feelings.

However, it is important to note that the symptoms of schizophrenia vary greatly from person to person, from mild to severe. Consequently, it is important that a psychiatrist be consulted to make the diagnosis and begin treatment.

For the one in 100 people who develop schizophrenia, the main treatment is anti-psychotic medications. People with this mental illness are also often referred to hospital programs or community agencies, where they receive counselling. These two modalities of treatment are the most effective means of easing the symptoms and learning to manage them.

Reference: Canadian Mental Health Association

www.cmha.ca/english/info_centre/mh_pamphlets/mh_pamphlet_02.htm

www.ontario.cmha.ca/content/about_mental_illness/schizophrenia.asp

www.cmha.ca/english/info_centre/mh_pamphlets/mh_pamphlet_16.htm (this website also has additional information on "theories about the causes of schizophrenia" and "treatments" which were not included above)

For more website addresses and resources about schizophrenia please go to the "Links & Resources" section of our website.