

Mental Health Matters

Plain Talk about Schizophrenia



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Schizophrenia is a serious brain disorder and one of the most debilitating and baffling mental illnesses known. It is a disease that makes it difficult for a person to tell the difference between real and unreal experiences, to think logically, to have normal emotional responses to others, and to behave normally in social situations. People with schizophrenia may also have difficulty in remembering, talking, and behaving appropriately.

Schizophrenia is one of the more serious mental illnesses and can have a variety of symptoms. This illness varies in its severity from one individual to another, and also within any one afflicted individual from one time period to another. Sometimes these symptoms come on suddenly, but most often, the illness develops slowly over months or even years. At first, symptoms may go unnoticed or may be confused with those of other conditions. For example, people with Schizophrenia may feel tense, be unable to concentrate, or have difficulty sleeping. Those afflicted also become increasingly isolated and socially withdrawn.

As the illness progresses, the symptoms often become more bizarre, and are described as symptoms of psychosis. The person develops peculiar behavior, speaks nonsensically, and may develop hallucinations, that is, they may see, feel, smell, or hear things that are not really there. During the psychotic phase, people with Schizophrenia may also suffer from delusions, i.e., have thoughts that are fragmented, bizarre,

and have no basis in reality. They may also develop disordered thinking and speech patterns in which the associations among their thoughts and words are very loose.

Schizophrenia seems to worsen and improve in cycles known as relapses and remission, respectively. At times, patients may appear relatively normal, but usually there will be repeated episodes of the illness that will cause the symptoms to reappear. It is one of the most common serious illnesses that can cause repeated hospitalizations.

Antipsychotic medications (often called neuroleptics) are very effective in controlling the symptoms of the illness. Because each person with Schizophrenia has a unique mix of symptoms no single medication works best for all people. Also, there is a high percentage of patients who do not comply with their medications due to bad side effects that they could not tolerate. However, a new generation of these antipsychotic medications has been shown to reduce the side effects, and more significantly has improved the quality of life of patients. Because of these new drugs, patients now are more integrated into society, some of them are able to graduate from college and many are gainfully employed and productive members of our society.

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