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## What is Schizophrenia?

Schizophrenia is a severe mental illness occurring mainly in young adults. Schizophrenia happens to people from all walks of life but most commonly its onset occurs between the ages of 18 and 25 years. However, having said this schizophrenia can occur in older people as well. The symptoms of schizophrenia can include

### **Disordered thinking-**

When acutely ill, people with schizophrenia make unusual, illogical associations in their thinking. They lose the capacity for abstract thought. Words can become jumbled, strange and incoherent. The flow of thoughts is often blocked and conversation no longer makes sense.

### **Delusions-**

These are immovable, rigid beliefs held by the person about being controlled or harmed in some way. They feel that thoughts are being unwantedly inserted into or withdrawn from their minds, that others can 'hear' their thoughts or that the T.V. or radio is sending them special messages.

### **Hallucinations-**

These are illusory sensations, where people with schizophrenia hear voices that no-one else hears. Thoughts are spoken aloud by other voices, conversing with the individual about themselves, telling them what is happening, describing their situation in bizarre and warped contexts. The voices can be so persuasive that people often act in wildly inappropriate ways as the voices incite them, sometimes with serious consequences.

### **Inappropriate Emotional Expression-**

Emotions may be dull, flat, or out of control and over excited. They may be inappropriate, like laughing at something sad, or crying at something amusing.

### **Social withdrawal-**

People with schizophrenia retreat into their own world, avoiding company and spending hours alone, often in their bedroom.

### **Severe loss of motivation-**

People with schizophrenia lose initiative and energy to a marked degree. They can become unconcerned about personal hygiene or appearance.

### **Denial-**

People with schizophrenia may not accept that they are ill. They may refuse to seek professional help, refuse prescribed medication or remain completely untreated, causing serious problems for their relatives and other carers.

Most people with schizophrenia do not have all of these symptoms, and some are more severely affected by them than others. At their worst, the symptoms may make it very difficult for the person to lead a normal life. They can make the world a confusing and often frightening place.

### **Causes of Schizophrenia:**

The cause of schizophrenia is not known. It is considered, however, to be not one, but a group of diseases of the brain, characterised by disordered perception, thinking and feeling. Research is concerned with possible contributing factors, such as genetic or biochemical defects, slow acting viral infections, as well as environmental influences. There have been a number of studies linking the onset of

schizophrenia with substance abuse. Marijuana usage has been particularly noted as a relevant factor, It is not proven whether Marijuana is a cause of schizophrenia, a contributing factor in an individual who has a predisposition to the illness, or whether drug usage is sometimes used by sufferers to escape the trauma of undiagnosed schizophrenic experiences.

### **Management of Schizophrenia:**

#### **Medication:**

Medication is the most effective method of controlling hallucinations, delusions and thought disorders. Some people recover, but more often they continue to have trouble with the symptoms throughout their life. It may be necessary to stay on medication for extended periods, perhaps forever. Some of the drugs have very difficult side effects and can cause dry mouth, weight gain, impotence and nausea. For this reason, as well as for the reason that once people start to feel well they may believe they no longer need medication, relapses due to failure to take medication are a common occurrence. Some people simply refuse to take medication.

#### **Learning to live with the Illness:**

As a result of schizophrenia adjustments have to be made. Ways of coping can be developed by:

- Gaining information about schizophrenia
- Getting help with interpersonal difficulties
- Encouraging the development of self help training, advice about nutrition, hygiene, budgeting and homemaking
- Developing recreational pursuits
- Assessing educational levels and training for a vocation

#### **Community Services:**

Today, the emphasis is primarily on treating people with mental illnesses whilst they remain living within the community, with brief periods in hospital prescribed only if necessary.

Often families of people with schizophrenia are the major sources of patient care. For this reason, the families of people with schizophrenia also need support. Being the parent or close family of a person living with schizophrenia is a heart breaking and difficult task requiring extraordinary patience. Not only does the illness mean that family are never sure what the next moment will bring but often, there is the added difficulty of coping with social ostracism and lack of understanding.