

# SCHIZOPHRENIA: HELP FOR PARTNERS AND FAMILIES

Schizophrenia is a disturbance of the brain's functioning. It disturbs the way people think, feel and relate to others. During a lifetime, people with schizophrenia may become actively ill once or twice, or have many more episodes.

## WHEN SOMEONE YOU LOVE HAS SCHIZOPHRENIA

When someone in a family is ill, everyone is affected, not just the person with the illness. As a family member or friend of a person with schizophrenia, you may find the illness distressing, especially during the active phase. The first episode can be particularly upsetting if you do not know what is wrong or how to help.

Acknowledging the illness can be the first step toward feeling less isolated and freeing your energy for caring for both your relative and yourself. It's important to remember that schizophrenia is not caused by family pressure or parental errors.

Most people with schizophrenia want treatment and can be persuaded to accept it. Others may not recognize that they are ill. This makes it difficult for them, if they refuse to accept the help they need, and for their family members, who recognize the need for treatment.

## HOW TO RELATE TO THE FAMILY MEMBER WITH SCHIZOPHRENIA

In the active phase of schizophrenia, people may feel their minds are being bombarded from all directions by ideas, questions and commands. They may feel too overwhelmed to sort out even minor problems.

Generally speaking, you should try to be as supportive and understanding as possible, and to speak in a calm, clear and straightforward manner. When necessary, you can help to reduce stress by relieving the ill person's responsibilities.

People with schizophrenia may use words that sound like nonsense to others. If they cannot be understood, you should try to communicate your interest and concern in other ways. You can listen to music, paint, watch television or sit quietly together. You will soon learn what works best by noticing the person's responses to what you do together.

Never talk as if the ill person is not there. People with schizophrenia are usually aware of what is going on around them, even if they appear not to be listening.

## TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

Caught up in concern and caring for the person who is ill, family members may not take proper care of themselves. They may give up their own activities and become isolated from their friends and colleagues. This may go on for some time before they realize they are emotionally and physically drained. The stress can lead to sleeping problems, exhaustion and constant irritability.

- Keep your own support network.
- Avoid becoming isolated.
- Recognize signs of stress in yourself.
- Know what situations within your family are most stressful in coping with schizophrenia.
- Keep up your interests outside the family.
- Consider having your own professional support.
- Take a little time each day just for you.

## BEING READY FOR A RELAPSE OR CRISIS

Although some people have only one episode of schizophrenia, schizophrenia is usually a condition that includes relapses. Families often avoid talking to their relative about relapses or crises. The best way to handle a crisis, or possibly avoid one, is to know what to do before it happens.

Be aware of stresses that trigger relapses so these can be reduced or avoided. Seek treatment as soon as symptoms return. Some hospitals and outpatient clinics offer family education programs to help relatives learn coping and communication strategies. When your relative or partner is well, write out a plan of what to do if he or she should become ill:

- Could you visit the physician together to discuss the condition and how to deal with a possible crisis?
- If your family member becomes ill, do you have advance permission to contact his or her doctor?
- Do you have consent to take your family member to hospital? If so, which hospital?
- If the person becomes unable to decide on treatment, does he or she agree that you can make that decision?

## RECOVERY

Some people recover from their first active phase of schizophrenia and stay well; others are not so fortunate.

As a person with schizophrenia improves, hospital staff, especially social workers, may talk to family members about living arrangements. Some people return home, some go to group homes and still others find rooms and apartments of their own. Each family must make its own decision. It is common to try one living plan and then another. It is often helpful to discuss what kind of accommodation is available and what could be most helpful to the ill person at different stages of recovery.

