



Medication, support services can help schizophrenia victims

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Graduating from high school, attending college, finding a job that is satisfying, building lasting relationships — these are goals that most of us expect to meet.

But for the approximately 1 percent of the population affected by schizophrenia, these aspirations become almost unattainable. A diagnosis of schizophrenia can be devastating and life-altering for all those involved.

Timely intervention and ongoing support can make the difference between social isolation and a meaningful life as part of a community.

Schizophrenia is a mental disorder that generally appears in the late teens to the late 20s. In some cases, it seems to develop gradually over time. In other cases, it appears to hit suddenly. Either way the effect can be devastating.

Schizophrenia is a complex, chronic and severe disorder that affects the brain. There is no physical or laboratory test to establish the presence of this illness. A diagnosis is made based on reported or observed symptoms and by ruling out other possible medical conditions such as seizures, a brain tumor, thyroid dysfunction, drug use and metabolic disorders.

Symptoms characteristic of schizophrenia include delusions, hallucinations, lack of motivation (avolition), social withdrawal, poor expression of emotions, disorganized or catatonic behavior and cognitive difficulties. As with other illnesses, there are various types of schizophrenia. Each is defined based on the prominent symptoms that are causing distress or impairment.

For example, an individual who feels persecuted by those around him and isolates himself due to the paranoia he is experiencing is referred to as having schizophrenia, paranoid type.

The primary treatment for schizophrenia is medication and supportive services to assist the individual in the areas of life that have been impaired by this illness.

While medication plays an essential role in the treatment of schizophrenia, barriers to reintegration exist due to the profound impact of this illness on both cognitive and social functioning. These barriers lead to stigmas which are distorted by misconceptions and unrealistic portrayals of those suffering from mental illness. The following are common myths:

Myth: People with schizophrenia have "split personalities."

Truth: This is not a symptom of schizophrenia. This myth may refer to the disconnect that individuals with this illness may experience between thought and feeling.

Myth: People with schizophrenia are dangerous.

Truth: Some individuals with schizophrenia may be dangerous but most are not.

According to Dr. Ken Duckworth, medical director for the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), "There is a small subset of this population that can be dangerous.... people with psychotic symptoms account for only 1 to 5 percent of violent crimes and are much more

likely to be victims."

Myth: Most people with schizophrenia will never get better.

Truth: Recovery is possible. Great strides have been made in the treatment of schizophrenia.

The newer medications are less sedating and have fewer side effects.

Community-based services assist individuals in living more independently outside the confines of a hospital. Support groups such as NAMI work diligently to educate families and involve them in treatment.

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