

Schizophrenia:

Schizophrenia is a severe disturbance of the brain's functioning. It affects how a person thinks, acts and feels. At times they may lose touch with reality. This is called psychosis. At other times the person may feel depressed and withdraw from the outside world.

The two main psychotic symptoms are delusions and hallucinations. Delusions are false beliefs that someone holds to be true but are not shared by others. At times delusions may include paranoia where the person feels threatened by others. Hallucinations occur when a person's senses play tricks on them and they hear, see, smell, taste or feel things that are not there. The person may talk in a way that is difficult to follow. Insight into their behaviour and the initiative to seek treatment may be poor.

Not all people with psychotic symptoms have schizophrenia.

Schizophrenia affects 1% i.e. one person in every 100. It crosses all cultures and social classes.

It tends to be a life-long illness with onset usually in the late teens, beginning slightly earlier in males. As such, social function, education, employment and family relationships are therefore often disrupted. Substance abuse may occur, as the person tries to make sense of their experiences and fit in socially. Unfortunately this makes diagnosis and appropriate treatment more difficult. Outcomes can be improved dramatically by early intervention and sustained treatment.

Sadly, despite treatment programmes, some 10-15% of people who suffer from schizophrenia end their lives by suicide. A small minority may be violent towards others – but it is a very small minority, and is usually the result of the person feeling threatened.

The exact cause of schizophrenia remains a mystery. Current theories see it as a diverse condition with a cluster of underlying causes.

Assessment and treatment for a primary psychosis, especially a first episode is carried out by mental health professionals. Extensive investigations take place. Treatment, usually involving antipsychotic medication and sedatives may be started – according to the diagnosis made. Supportive counselling to assist the person to learn to manage stress and emotions and develop problem solving techniques plays an important role. Treatment is free.

There is currently no cure for schizophrenia. Some people will remain vulnerable to relapse and have sustained disability. Despite this, quality of life is possible with many people recovering to lead full and satisfying lives.

There are many misconceptions about this illness.

Schizophrenia is not about having multiple personalities. Neither is a person with schizophrenia inherently violent. When receiving treatment, they are no more likely than people in the general population to commit crimes – less likely in fact than young males or people affected by alcohol and/or other drugs.

Schizophrenia gets a particularly bad rap from the media, film industry and, as a result, the wider community.

The journey to recovery for many people with schizophrenia can be extremely difficult. They so much deserve our understanding and support.

In Taranaki, there are a number of agencies supporting people and families affected by schizophrenia. Thank goodness.

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