



## **Schizophrenia**

Schizophrenia is a challenging disorder that can make it difficult to distinguish between what is real and unreal, to think clearly, manage emotions, relate to others and function normally. Suspecting that someone close to you may have schizophrenia can be a very emotional and stressful experience. Thankfully it does not mean there isn't hope. The good news is that schizophrenia can be managed successfully. The first step to this is to recognise the symptoms, the second is to seek help as quickly as possible. With the right treatment, and supports you can learn to manage the disorder and lead a happy fulfilling life.

### **Understanding what Schizophrenia is**

It is important to understand what schizophrenia really is. There are a lot of myths and misinformation about the condition. Misinformation about schizophrenia leads to a stigma surrounding the disease, this is the last thing the sufferers need.

Schizophrenia is a brain disorder that affects the way a person behaves, thinks and sees the world. Paranoid schizophrenia is the most common form of schizophrenia. People with paranoid schizophrenia have an altered perception of reality. They may hear or see things that do not exist, talk in confusing and strange ways, believe that people are trying to harm them, or feel like they are constantly being watched. This form of schizophrenia often leads to relationship problems, it can disrupt normal day to day activities like bathing or eating and can lead to alcohol or drug abuse in an attempt to self-medicate.

### **What are the symptoms?**

The symptoms of schizophrenia vary dramatically from person to person, in both severity and patterns. Not every person with schizophrenia will have all the symptoms and they may also change over time.

There are five symptoms characteristic of schizophrenia:

- **Delusions:** A delusion is a firmly held idea that a person has despite clear and obvious evidence that it isn't true. Delusions are very common in schizophrenia. Often these delusions involve illogical or bizarre ideas or fantasies
- **Hallucinations:** Schizophrenic hallucinations are usually meaningful to the person experiencing them. It may be voices of a person they know, usually abusive, critical or vulgar
- **Disorganized speech:** A person with schizophrenia may experience difficulty maintaining their train of thought or find trouble concentrating- this in turn manifests itself in the way they speak. The person may start sentences with one topic and end with another, or speak incoherently, or respond to queries with an unrelated answer
- **Disorganized behaviour:** Schizophrenia disrupts goal-orientated activity, impairing your ability to take care of yourself, your work, and interact with others
- **"Negative" Symptoms:** The so-called "negative" symptoms of schizophrenia refer to the absence of normal behaviours such as, lack of enthusiasm or interests, or lack of emotional expression

### **What are the causes?**

It is not known what the exact cause of schizophrenia is, but researchers believe that it is a combination of genetics, brain chemistry and environmental factors that contribute to the development of this disorder. There are certain factors that seem to increase the risk of developing or triggering schizophrenia. Some of these risks include:

- Family history of schizophrenia
- Some pregnancy or birth complications such as malnutrition
- Taking mind-altering (psychoactive or psychotropic) drugs during the teen years or young adulthood

### **How is schizophrenia treated?**

A schizophrenia diagnosis can be scary. But it's a step in the right direction. Starting treatment as soon as possible is crucial to recovery. The most effective treatment strategy involves a combination of medication, therapy, lifestyle changes and social support. It is important to remember not to buy into the stigma that if someone has schizophrenia they can't get better. With the right treatment many people with schizophrenia are able to regain normal functioning and even become symptom-free.

