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Schizophrenia is a Frightening Disease

What if, no matter what you did or where you went, people were out to get you? How would you feel if you believed you had no control over your life, because others did? How would you react if the voices you heard spoke only to you, and the rest of the world did not seem to hear them? Chances are, you would be terrified, angry, powerless. You might react by withdrawing from others, by passively watching the world go by in order to minimize the likelihood that others notice of you. Maybe then they would not read your thoughts and control your mind.

Welcome to the world of schizophrenia, a disease of the brain that affects over 2 ½ million Americans each year. It is a chronic, severe, and disabling disease whose cause remains unknown. This serious mental illness results in personality changes, disorganized thought patterns, abnormal behavior, and even unusual speech. Schizophrenia encompasses a broad range of symptoms, which are classified into three categories.

Positive symptoms are abnormal experiences. A person may become delusional, in which the inability to separate real from imaginary experiences results in strongly held personal beliefs that are false. Or a person may suffer from disturbances in sensory perception, resulting in hallucinations. Hallucinations consist of hearing, seeing, or feeling something that really is not there. Paranoia is a third type of positive symptom in which the person experiences unrealistic fear. Nearly 1/3 of people with schizophrenia feel they are being persecuted, harassed, or conspired against, according to the National Institutes of Health.

Symptoms of schizophrenia may also be negative. These symptoms reflect the absence of normal behavior, such as withdrawal, lack of motivation, and lack of feelings of pleasure and enjoyment. Many times, this results in neglect of self-care, problems communicating with others, and an inability to maintain relationships with others.

A third category of symptoms of schizophrenia is problems with cognitive function. Difficulty concentrating, learning problems, and memory disorders resulting from this disease add to the person's inability to maintain social relationships and to hold a job.

Some experts believe that these severe symptoms become evident in a late stage of this disease process, and that people with schizophrenia first experience mental and emotional changes before psychotic symptoms emerge. Unfortunately, these early signs are not specific, and may not even be noticeable. However, the most common early sign of a serious mental illness is usually a decline in a person's usual way functioning and relating to others. As with many illnesses, early treatment yields better results than later interventions, but with such subtle early signs of schizophrenia, people at risk rarely get the care they need early in the disease process. Further, because schizophrenia affects the part of the brain that controls self-analysis, as many as 50% of people with this disease do not understand that they are ill, so treatment is further delayed.

As previously stated, the cause of schizophrenia is unknown, but researchers continue to unlock many of the secrets of this disease. While it is a serious mental illness, it is now recognized as a disease of the brain. There is considerable data supporting the notion that schizophrenia is caused by a neurodevelopment problem that results from physical damage to the brain. Many studies have found abnormalities in both the structure of the brain and the functioning of the brain. Some of these abnormalities have been traced to the development of the fetus before birth. Other studies have revealed an association with chemical imbalances in the brain with the development of schizophrenia. In addition to brain injury, there appears to be a hereditary factor at work: people with a close relative with schizophrenia are more likely to develop this disease than those without a genetic link.

However, a diagnosis of schizophrenia need not be a sentence to a life of institutions and despair. During Schizophrenia Awareness Week (May 21-27), the National Schizophrenic Foundation wants the public to know that people with this disease can live a more “normal” life with appropriate medication, therapy, and support. Although it is a life-long condition, many people are able to limit the number and severity of their psychotic episodes with proper medication to treat the worst symptoms of the disease. In addition, psychosocial treatments including counseling can help with psychological, social, and occupational problems that are part of schizophrenia. While no therapy has been found that is totally effective, many people can improve enough to live independently in the community.

To obtain more information about schizophrenia, contact the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill at www.anmi.org (1-800-950-6264), the National Mental Health Association at www.nmha.org (1-800-969-6942), the National Schizophrenic Foundation at www.nsfoundationl.org (1-800-482-9534), or the National Alliance for Research on Schizophrenia and Depression at www.narsad.org (1-800-829-8289). To learn more about this or other public health issues, contact the Central Connecticut Health District at www/ccthd.org (860-721-2822).