mental health fact sheet

SCHIZOPHRENIA

Schizophrenia is a disturbance of the brain's functioning. It can seriously disturb the way people think, feel and relate to others.

About one person in 100 develops schizophrenia. Men and women are affected equally; however, men tend to have their first episode of schizophrenia in their late teens or early 20s. With women, the onset is usually a few years later. In most cases, the illness can start so gradually that people will begin to have symptoms, but they and their families may not be aware of the illness for a long time. In some cases, however, the onset is rapid.

PHASES

Schizophrenia has three phases — prodromal (or beginning), active and residual. These phases tend to happen in order and appear in cycles throughout the course of the illness. During a lifetime, people with schizophrenia may become actively ill once or twice, or have many more episodes.

Prodromal phase

In the prodromal phase, people may begin to lose interest in their usual activities and to withdraw from friends and family members. They may become easily confused, have trouble concentrating, and feel listless and apathetic, preferring to spend most of their days alone. They may also become intensely preoccupied with religion or philosophy. This phase can last weeks or months.

Active phase

During schizophrenia's active phase, people may have delusions, hallucinations, marked distortions in thinking and disturbances in behaviour and feelings. This phase is often the most frightening to the person with schizophrenia, and to others.

Residual phase

After an active phase, people may be listless, have trouble concentrating and be withdrawn. The symptoms in this phase are similar to those outlined under the prodromal phase.

SYMPTOMS

The symptoms of schizophrenia fall into two categories — "positive" and "negative" symptoms. Positive symptoms (sometimes called psychotic symptoms) refer to symptoms that appear; negative symptoms refer to elements that are taken away from a person.

Positive Symptoms

Positive symptoms include:

- delusions (fixed, false beliefs that are not consistent with the person's culture, and have no basis in fact)
- hallucinations (people hear, see, taste, smell or feel something that does not actually exist)
- disorganized thought (unconnected thoughts that make it impossible to communicate clearly with other people)
- disorganized mood (finding it hard to express feelings; feeling inappropriate or intense bursts of emotion; feeling empty of any emotions)
- disorganized behaviour (cannot complete everyday tasks such as bathing, dressing appropriately and preparing simple meals)
- changes in sensitivity (more sensitive and aware of other people; or withdrawn and seeming to pay no attention to others).

Negative symptoms

Negative symptoms include:

- slowing of physical activity levels or, more rarely, overactivity
- reduced motivation, for example problems finishing tasks or making long-term plans
- loss of interest in the feelings and lives of others
- less concern for personal appearance.

CAUSES

No single cause has been found for schizophrenia, although there is a clear genetic link. Research has given us clues in the search for better ways to diagnose and treat the illness.

TREATMENTS

People with schizophrenia may be treated as outpatients or they may be hospitalized. Treatment usually consists of medication and psychosocial interventions. Throughout treatment, families can receive support and education during sessions with the treatment team. Antipsychotic medications are the main class of drugs used to treat schizophrenia. They relieve symptoms of psychosis and may help to prevent a relapse. Other medications may be prescribed to help manage the side-effects of antipsychotics or to treat particular symptoms such as depression, anxiety or sleep difficulties.

Schizophrenia usually develops in young people during the years when they would normally develop the skills needed for independent living. A variety of psychosocial interventions such as case management, counselling, and housing programs are often used to help develop these skills.

Family counselling can help people with schizophrenia and their families understand and manage problems associated with the illness.

It is important to try to avoid relapses by following the prescribed treatment.

RECOVERY

It is impossible to predict how well a person will recover after the onset of the disorder. Some will recover almost totally. Some people will need medication and support for the rest of their lives.

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health
Centre de toxicomanie et de santé mentale

For further information:
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