

About this factsheet

This is one in a series of factsheets for parents, teachers and young people entitled *Mental Health and Growing Up*. The aims of these factsheets are to provide practical, up-to-date information about mental health problems (emotional, behavioural and psychiatric disorders) that can affect children and young people. This factsheet explains what schizophrenia is and gives practical help and advice about how and where to get help for young people affected by this mental illness.

Introduction

What is schizophrenia?

Schizophrenia is a serious mental disorder that affects thinking, emotions and behaviour. It is the most common form of psychosis and affects one person in every 100. Schizophrenia is rare before puberty. It is most likely to start between the ages of 15 and 35 years, but can occur in younger children. The illness might last for a long time and can be very disabling.

When a young person has a 'psychotic breakdown', not due to drug use, and a definite diagnosis may not be possible, it can be difficult to know what the long-term effects will be.

What are the symptoms?

Schizophrenia affects everybody differently. There are two groups of symptoms, which are described as 'positive' and 'negative'. Young people with schizophrenia often have a mixture of the two. Sometimes, the illness develops slowly and can be hard to spot, but some young people become unwell very quickly.

Positive symptoms

Delusions: this means holding beliefs that are not only untrue, but that can seem quite bizarre. The young person may believe that they are someone different, the President of the USA for example, or they may believe that other people are 'out to get them'. They will believe that this is true despite what you say.

Thought disorder is when someone is not thinking straight and it is hard to make sense of what they are saying. Their ideas may be jumbled up, but it is more than being muddled or confused.

Hallucinations are when someone sees, hears, smells or feels something that isn't really there. The most common hallucination that people have is hearing voices. In schizophrenia, hallucinations are totally real to the person having them. This

can be very frightening and can make them believe that they are being watched or picked on. People who are having these experiences may act strangely. For example, they may talk or laugh to themselves as if talking to somebody that you can't see.

Negative symptoms

The young person suffering from schizophrenia may become withdrawn and can appear unemotional. They seem to lose interest, stop washing regularly or spend a lot of time on their own. They are not able to carry on with their normal activities and usually find it impossible to concentrate on work or study.

How to get help

The earlier it is recognised that the young person is ill, the better the chances of getting effective treatment. This speeds recovery and reduces the long-term harm. Some people can make a complete recovery.

Even if your child won't come with you, you must speak to your general practitioner first. It is likely that you will be referred to a psychiatrist (see Factsheet 31 on child and adolescent psychiatrists). Your child may need admission to hospital.

Medication

Medication plays an important part in the treatment of schizophrenia. It treats the symptoms of the illness and allows normal life to be resumed. Medication tends to be more effective with positive symptoms, less so with negative symptoms. Hallucinations and delusions may take some weeks to disappear.

A number of drugs are available, and the doctor will advise which is the best for your child. Sometimes a number of different drugs will need to be tried before the best 'fit' is found. The treatment may need to be long-term, but you must discuss this with your doctor. Unfortunately,

Sources of further information

- Rethink offers help to people with severe mental illness (not only schizophrenia) and their carers. 30 Tabernacle Street, London EC2A 4DD; national advice line 020 8974 6814; e-mail: advice@rethink.org; www.rethink.org.
- YoungMinds Parents' Information Service provides information and advice on child mental health issues. 102–108 Clerkenwell Road, London EC1M 5SA; Parents' Information Service 0800 018 2138; www.youngminds.org.uk.
Or you may like to look at these websites:
www.rethink.org/at-ease
www.sane.org.uk
www.mdf.org.uk (manic depression)
www.pendulum.org (manic depression)
- *Changing Minds: A Multimedia CD-ROM about Mental Health* is intended for 13–17 year olds; it talks about addiction, stress, eating disorders, depression, schizophrenia and self-harm. Further details from the Royal College of Psychiatrists: tel. 020 7235 2351, ext. 146; www.rcpsych.ac.uk/publications/avideo/cmindsd/index.htm.
- The *Mental Health and Growing Up* series contains 36 factsheets on a range of common mental health problems. To order the pack, contact Book Sales at the Royal College of Psychiatrists, 17 Belgrave Square, London SW1X 8PG; tel. 020 7235 2351, ext. 146; fax 020 7245 1231; e-mail: booksales@rcpsych.ac.uk, or you can download them from www.rcpsych.ac.uk.

schizophrenia can recur, and may need long-term treatment.

There are side-effects to these medicines. Your doctor can advise you about what they are and what can be done to help. The risk of side-effects needs to be balanced against the risk of the damaging effects of the illness on a person's life.

Practical help and support

It is crucial that drug treatments should be combined with practical help and support for

the young person and their family. This includes:

- **Help with understanding the illness.**
It is very important that the young person with schizophrenia and their family are helped to understand the condition, and how best to manage their life.
- **Help to resume education or start work.** An episode of schizophrenia can interfere with education because it is difficult to learn when you are unwell. An important part of recovery is to begin to plan the young person's future.
- **Help with family relationships.** Criticism, hostility and stress are likely to cause a relapse. Families need help in recognising and controlling these, and on how best to support the young person. As is normal for all young people, this may include helping a young person to leave home and to live independently.
- **Help to cope with voices (hallucinations).** Some people with schizophrenia find a type of psychotherapy, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), helpful in managing voices, often in combination with medicines. Talking treatments, such as CBT, can be helpful, but needs to be given in addition to medication (see the Royal College of Psychiatrists' information factsheet on Cognitive Therapy on www.rcpsych.ac.uk).

When treated properly, many young people with schizophrenia can go on to lead a life that is enjoyable and fulfilling.

References

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- Rutter, M. & Taylor, E. (eds) (2002) *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* (4th edn). London: Blackwell.
- Scott, A., Shaw, M. & Joughin, C. (eds) (2001) *Finding the Evidence: A Gateway to the Literature in Child and Adolescent Mental Health* (2nd edn). London: Gaskell.