

# Understanding and Controlling Schizophrenia

People with schizophrenia experience great suffering, not only because of the illness itself, but also because of the prejudice and discrimination they are forced to endure at the hands of others. However, it is important to know that a person with schizophrenia can control the symptoms of the illness and lead a satisfying life.

## / Understanding Schizophrenia

Schizophrenia is part of a group of illnesses called *psychotic disorders*, which affect the thoughts, emotions, perceptions, behaviour, memory, judgment, mood and motivation of the people who suffer from them. Schizophrenia changes the way individuals interact with people in their environment, and may lead them to **lose touch with reality**.

### Recognizing the Signs

Schizophrenia reveals itself differently in different people. The first signs usually appear **between the ages of 16 and 35**, and, in many cases, they **emerge gradually**. At first, changes in behaviour may be so slight that they go unnoticed. Then, the following may become apparent:

- Depressed mood or mood swings
- Loss of motivation, interest or energy
- Absence of expressions or emotions
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Tendency to withdraw
- Hallucinations (seeing, hearing or smelling things that no one else perceives)
- Episodes of delusion (ideas or interpretations of events that do not correspond to reality. For example, people with schizophrenia may believe that they are being spied on, or that they have been entrusted with an important mission.)

- Exaggerated or amplified preoccupations, or obsessions that take on excessive proportions
- Agitation or anxiety
- Confusion, incoherent speech, or disorganized behaviour

People with schizophrenia may go through phases of remission during which the symptoms decrease in intensity or disappear entirely, but **the risk of relapse remains if the illness is not treated**.

It is often difficult to determine—especially among adolescents—whether changes in a person's behaviour are normal or indicate a problem. Moreover, other health problems may trigger symptoms similar to those of schizophrenia. Establishing a diagnosis, therefore, may take a long time.

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## / Who Can Suffer from Schizophrenia?

Schizophrenia affects 1 in 100 people in Canada, striking men and women from all social groups and all cultural communities. The causes of schizophrenia are not yet well understood, but biological and genetic factors probably play a role in occurrence of the illness.

Several factors, such as excessive stress, or drug or alcohol abuse, **may trigger the onset of symptoms.**

## Fighting Prejudice

Thinking that schizophrenia causes a split personality is a common misconception. Moreover, people suffering from it are neither less intelligent nor more violent than the rest of the population.

## / Everyday Consequences

Schizophrenia affects all aspects of the lives of people who suffer from it.

Loss of touch with reality, along with difficulty organizing ideas or feeling emotions, may lead sufferers to act in inappropriate ways. This sort of behaviour may have undesirable consequences for sufferers and/or the people around them.

Lack of motivation and energy may interfere with sufferers' daily activities (such as taking care of themselves, buying groceries, making a budget, or respecting a school or work schedule).

Fear of being judged and feelings of shame may **lead sufferers to withdraw.**

As a result of these difficult consequences, a large proportion of people suffering from schizophrenia experience related problems, such as alcohol or drug abuse. Their distress may even become so deep that they begin having suicidal thoughts or exhibiting suicidal or self-destructive behaviour.

In spite of these difficulties, it is important **not to lose hope**: with support and appropriate treatment, it is possible to control the illness and achieve a better quality of life.

"I went through some very hard times, but I am doing better and better. I have a job that I like and, above all, a girlfriend who supports me. She really helped me accept that the treatment is part of my life."

Julien, age 32

# / Overcoming Schizophrenia

## Getting Support

All too often people with symptoms of a mental disorder hesitate to talk about it. This is particularly true of schizophrenia, an illness that is not yet well understood and which remains the subject of many taboos. By withdrawing, however, people with schizophrenia needlessly prolong their suffering and delay their recovery.

If you believe you are experiencing symptoms of schizophrenia, **consult a health care professional such as a doctor or a psychologist without delay.** Workers in the **community organizations** listed on the last page of this brochure can also provide information and support for you and your loved ones.

## Adapted Treatment

The treatment of schizophrenia is based on a **combination of complementary elements.**

## Getting Involved in Your Treatment

- Attend follow-up appointments with your doctor.
- Participate actively and faithfully in your psychotherapy.
- Respect the dosage and duration of your medication.
- Adopt and maintain a balanced lifestyle.
- Remain alert and watch for warning signs of a relapse in order to reduce the risk of one.
- Work together with your loved ones and all of the people who can help you maintain your balance.
- **Always consult a health care professional before changing or stopping a component of your treatment.**

## Psychotherapy and Psychosocial Support

Psychotherapy helps people better cope with the illness. It contributes to increased self-knowledge and helps individuals identify the emotions, thoughts and behaviour that are harmful to their well-being.

Support groups are extremely useful tools for helping people with schizophrenia and their families manage the difficulties related to the illness. The discussions and exchanges that take place in such groups help sufferers and their families to break through their isolation and better receive support.

## Medication

Medication is used to **control the symptoms of the illness, prevent relapses and restore a better quality of life.** Antipsychotics (also known as *neuroleptics*) are the drugs most commonly used, but other types of medication may also be necessary.

Because each person is different, it sometimes takes time for a doctor to establish the most effective medication and dosage for each individual. By teaming up with your doctor, taking note of what you are feeling, and informing him or her of your observations, you can help find the best treatment plan as quickly as possible.

In order to **decrease the risks of a relapse**, medication must generally be taken long-term. It is therefore a good idea to view your treatment as an ally, as part of your life.

## Strategies for Regaining Your Balance

Healthy lifestyle habits combined with a positive view of life and one's self are extremely useful strategies in promoting mental health. As well, they help to reduce sufferers' risks of relapse.

- Opt for a balanced diet and aim to eat at regular hours.
- Engage in daily physical activity. Go at your own pace and choose activities that you enjoy: pleasure is the greatest motivator!
- Avoid alcohol and drugs. Even in small quantities, these substances may have very negative effects on people with schizophrenia. Moreover, alcohol and drugs may interact very dangerously with medication.
- Limit your intake of stimulants such as nicotine in tobacco and caffeine (found in coffee, tea, cocoa, colas and energy drinks).
- Ensure you get enough quality sleep.
- Manage your stress level by setting priorities and finding ways to respond better to stress (such as relaxation exercises).
- Promote high self-esteem: know how to appreciate your many qualities and accept your limits.
- Try to pay attention to the positive aspects of a situation as well as to the negative points.
- Surround yourself with positive people with whom you enjoy spending time, and whom you can count on when things are not going well.



## Preventing Suicide

Close to half the people who suffer from schizophrenia consider suicide at some point. But **it is possible to regain hope.**

**If you are thinking about suicide or if you are worried that someone close to you is considering suicide, get help immediately.**

- Association québécoise de prévention du suicide, 1 866 APPELLE (277-3553)
- 9-1-1 if it is an emergency

## Helping a Loved One

- If a person close to you seems to show signs of schizophrenia (see page 1), find the courage to talk to him or her about your concerns, without judgment and without forcing a diagnosis. Encourage him or her to consult a health care professional or to get information from community resources. Offer to accompany him or her in this process. If psychotic symptoms (delusions or hallucinations) are apparent, try to convince him or her to consult a professional as soon as possible. If the person has difficulty acknowledging the state that he or she is in, draw attention to a specific symptom that could persuade him or her to see a doctor.
- Living with a person suffering from schizophrenia can be challenging. The symptoms are often disconcerting or even frightening for those around the sufferer. Do not hesitate to ask for help, and pay attention to your own limits. Get as much information as possible so that you are better equipped to react to the manifestations of the illness.
- Encourage your loved one to follow all aspects of his or her treatment.
- **If the symptoms observed in your loved one lead you to believe that he or she presents a danger to him or herself or to others, it is an emergency: do not hesitate to dial 9-1-1 to obtain immediate assistance.**

## Resources Available to You

### HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS

- Your **doctor** or **pharmacist**
- The **CLSC** or **CSSS** in your area  
[www.msss.gouv.qc.ca/en/repertoires/csss](http://www.msss.gouv.qc.ca/en/repertoires/csss)
- **Ordre des psychologues du Québec**  
[www.ordrepsy.qc.ca](http://www.ordrepsy.qc.ca) / 1 800 561-1223
- **Ordre des travailleurs sociaux et des thérapeutes conjugaux et familiaux du Québec**  
[www.optsq.org](http://www.optsq.org) / 1 888 731-9420
- Professional services at **school or work**
- **Info-Santé**  
Dial **8-1-1**  
24 hours a day, 7 days a week
- **Douglas Institute**  
[www.douglas.qc.ca](http://www.douglas.qc.ca)

### COMMUNITY RESOURCES

- **Société québécoise de la schizophrénie**  
[www.schizophrenie.qc.ca](http://www.schizophrenie.qc.ca) / 1 866 888-2323
- **Mental Illness Foundation**  
[www.mentalillnessfoundation.org](http://www.mentalillnessfoundation.org)  
1 888 529-5354
- **Canadian Mental Health Association**  
[www.cmha.ca](http://www.cmha.ca)
- **Help Online**  
[www.aideenligne.ca/en](http://www.aideenligne.ca/en) / 1 866 766-5620
- **Fédération des familles et amis de la personne atteinte de maladie mentale**  
(Federation of families and friends of people with mental illnesses)  
[www.ffapamm.com](http://www.ffapamm.com) / 1 800 323-0474

- **Association québécoise de prévention du suicide**  
24 hours a day, 7 days a week  
everywhere in Québec  
[www.aqps.info](http://www.aqps.info)  
**1 866 APPELLE (277-3553)**
- In case of an **emergency**, dial **9-1-1**.

### PASS THIS BROCHURE ON!

The information in this brochure should not be interpreted as providing a medical diagnosis, and should not take the place of consultation with a health care professional.

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