

**UNDERSTANDING
MENTAL DISORDERS**

What Is Schizophrenia?



Melissa Abramovitz

CONTENTS

Introduction	4
Schizophrenia: A Personal and Societal Burden	
Chapter One	9
What Is Schizophrenia?	
Chapter Two	23
What Causes Schizophrenia?	
Chapter Three	37
What Is It like to Live with Schizophrenia?	
Chapter Four	50
Can Schizophrenia Be Treated or Cured?	
Source Notes	65
Organizations to Contact	71
For Further Research	75
Index	77
Picture Credits	80

CHAPTER 3

What Is It like to Live with Schizophrenia?

Living with schizophrenia is extremely challenging for affected patients and families. In the short term, accepting and getting the disease under control is difficult and often frustrating, disrupting all aspects of life to a great degree. In the long term, maintaining good control and striving to live a productive life pose ongoing challenges for those who experience some degree of recovery. According to *The Merck Manual*, “Symptoms of schizophrenia typically impair the ability to function and often markedly interfere with work, social relationships, and self-care. Unemployment, isolation, deteriorated relationships, and diminished quality of life are common outcomes.”³²

Consequences of Mental Confusion

Many challenges in living and interacting with others result from patients’ inability to distinguish reality from fantasy and from the onslaught of sensations that bombard their brains. Their confusion and fear prevent many schizophrenics from acting coherently and cause them to withdraw socially or behave in a frightening manner. One patient states, “An outsider may see only someone ‘out of touch with reality.’ In fact, we are experiencing so many realities that it is often confusing and sometimes totally overwhelming.”³³

In many cases distorted and overwhelming sensations prevent schizophrenics from following a conversation because it sounds like a foreign language when others speak. “I heard people talking, but I did not grasp the meaning of the words,” explains one sufferer named Renee. “From time to time, a word detached itself from the rest. It repeated itself over and over in my head.”³⁴

“Symptoms of schizophrenia typically impair the ability to function and often markedly interfere with work, social relationships, and self-care.”³²

—The Merck Manual.

Many schizophrenics also say that they only see parts of things or people and thus cannot recognize them. For others the mental jumble they experience prevents them from understanding what others are feeling. Therefore, if a family member or friend expresses joy or sorrow, schizophrenics will not respond at all or will respond inappropriately. Their mental confusion can also lead schizophrenics to lash out

violently if they believe someone is threatening them. These types of responses feed their inability to maintain relationships and fuel their social isolation.

Stigma and Crime

The odd, fearful, or violent behaviors that result from schizophrenics’ mental turmoil in turn trigger the disgust and/or fear in others that underlie the stigma and mistreatment directed at those with mental illness. Mentally ill people have been stigmatized throughout history. For instance, in ancient Rome many people believed the mentally ill were evil and should be tortured, starved, flogged, or otherwise punished.

Although most people now understand that schizophrenia is a biological disease, the stigma has not diminished; in fact, some studies show it has increased. Researchers at Palacký University in the Czech Republic explain in an article in *Neuropsychiatric Disease and Treatment* that since deinstitutionalization led many schizophrenics to live in communities, “verbal abuse and other harassment of the mentally ill by local teenagers and neighbors is . . . common.”³⁵ The NAMI reports that about 96 percent of the schizophrenics in the United States experience prejudice or discrimination that significantly impacts their lives.

Experts say the major factor that promotes stigma is the fear that follows news stories about schizophrenics who commit violent crimes. These include James Holmes, who killed twelve people and injured dozens more in a Colorado movie theater in 2012; Jared Loughner, who killed six people and injured thirteen others, including Representative Gabrielle Giffords, near Tucson, Arizona, in 2011; and

The Stigma of Mental Illness

Although evidence shows that mental illnesses such as schizophrenia result from a brain disorder, there is still much stigma associated with this disease and with other mental disorders. Polls conducted by researchers at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in January 2013, soon after schizophrenic Adam Lanza murdered twenty-six people in Newtown, Connecticut, found that overall, nearly half of Americans believed people with serious mental illnesses are significantly more dangerous than others. More than 70 percent were unwilling to work closely on a job with someone who has a serious mental illness, and nearly 70 percent were unwilling to have a mentally ill neighbor. On some questions, opinions differed depending on the respondents' experience with mental illness.

Public Attitudes About Mental Illness

Perceived dangerousness and social distance	Overall	No Experience with Mental Illness	Experience with Mental Illness
Do you agree or disagree that people with serious mental illness are, by far, more dangerous than the general population? (% agree)	45.6%	46.3%	44.8%
Do you agree or disagree that locating a group home or apartment for people with mental illness in a residential neighborhood endangers local residents? (% agree)	31.8%	33.5%	30.1%
Would you be willing or unwilling to have a person with a serious mental illness start working closely with you on a job? (% willing)	28.6%	22.0%	35.2%
Would you be willing or unwilling to have a person with serious mental illness as a neighbor? (% willing)	33.1%	26.3%	39.9%
Perceived discrimination and belief in recovery			
Do you agree or disagree that discrimination against people with mental illness is a serious problem? (% agree)	58.2%	49.9%	66.4%
Do you agree or disagree that most people with serious mental illness can, with treatment, get well and return to productive lives? (% agree)	55.9%	48.9%	63.2%

Source: Colleen L. Barry et al., "After Newtown: Public Opinion on Gun Policy and Mental Illness," *New England Journal of Medicine*, vol. 368, no. 12, March 21, 2013. www.nejm.org.

Adam Lanza, who murdered twenty-six people at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, in 2012.

Violence and Schizophrenia

The connection between violence and schizophrenia is controversial. Many medical experts and advocacy organizations state that schizophrenics are rarely violent. For example, the NIMH book *Schizophrenia* states, “People with schizophrenia are not especially prone to violence and often prefer to be left alone. Studies show that if people have no record of criminal violence before they develop schizophrenia and are not substance abusers, they are unlikely to commit crimes after they become ill.”³⁶

Statistics, however, offer a different perspective. Researchers at Simon Fraser University in Canada found that psychotic individuals are forty-nine to sixty-eight times more likely to commit violent acts against others than the rest of the population. A 2014 study in Sweden also found that 10.7 percent of male and 2.7 percent of female schizophrenics were convicted of a violent crime within five years of their diagnosis. The Swedish researchers concluded that schizophrenia is “associated with substantially increased rates of violent crime.”³⁷ In line with such studies, recent surveys indicate that nearly 50 percent of Americans believe schizophrenics are far more dangerous than other people, and this contributes to the stigmatization of those with the disease.

Research also shows that schizophrenics’ lives are significantly impacted by violence because they are at a higher risk of being crime victims. One study at the University of Maryland School of Medicine found that schizophrenics are fourteen times more likely to be crime victims than they are to be arrested for committing a crime. Those who are homeless and those who buy and use illegal drugs are especially vulnerable to being robbed, raped, or murdered. Many who live in group homes or halfway houses and receive Social Security checks also have their checks stolen and are subject to other abuses and crimes. This is often because most are too confused and disorganized to protect themselves and their property. This confusion also leads schizophrenics to rarely report crimes against themselves.

Special Challenges for Women

Women with schizophrenia face special challenges related to pregnancy and child rearing. Such women are unlikely to seek prenatal care, so they have more birth complications and abnormal babies than other women. Medications used to treat schizophrenia can hurt a fetus or nursing baby, so some pregnant women stop taking these medications, which worsens their psychotic symptoms. According to numerous studies, hallucinations and delusions often lead mothers to neglect or abuse their children. Because of such abuse and neglect, social services departments often place schizophrenics' babies and children in foster homes. In cases of divorce, schizophrenics are rarely awarded custody, and a 2012 study found that about half of all mothers with schizophrenia eventually lose custody of their children.

Some experts believe that with proper education and assistance, schizophrenics can be good parents. However, children who grow up with a schizophrenic mother are at increased risk for psychological and social problems and even death because of exposure to odd and dangerous situations. One mother starved her daughter because voices said the girl was evil. Another stabbed her child for the same reason. One adult child wrote that when she was young, her mother ran naked through the house, screaming at the child's friend that the friend's parents were plotting against them. After that, she never brought friends home. "I feel like I lost my whole childhood," said another adult. "I lost my family, I lost birthdays and holidays, trips to the beach and all the family stuff people take for granted."

Quoted in Jeanne M. Kaiser, "Victimized Twice: The Reasonable Efforts Requirement in Child Protection Cases When Parents Have a Mental Illness," *Whittier Journal of Child and Family Advocacy*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2011, p. 12.

Another reason many such crimes go unreported is that police often dismiss complaints by psychotic people as delusional. Advocates are currently trying to educate schizophrenics about the need to report such crimes and are training them in ways to do so. Education programs for law enforcement personnel that stress the need to treat mentally ill people respectfully and calmly are also under way.

ORGANIZATIONS TO CONTACT

American Psychiatric Association

1000 Wilson Blvd., Suite 1825

Arlington, VA 22209

phone: (703) 907-7300

website: www.psychiatry.org

The American Psychiatric Association is a professional organization for psychiatrists that also provides information about all aspects of mental illnesses such as schizophrenia, including symptoms, causes, diagnosis, treatment, living with the disease, and research.

American Psychological Association

750 First St. NE

Washington, DC 20002

phone: (202) 336-5500

website: <http://apa.org>

The American Psychological Association is a professional organization for psychologists. It also offers information about all aspects of schizophrenia and other mental illnesses.

Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law

1101 Fifteenth St. NW, Suite 1212

Washington, DC 20005

phone: (202) 467-5730

website: www.bazelon.org

The Bazelon Center advocates for the rights of mentally ill people to make their own choices and to participate fully in their communities. The center promotes laws that enforce these rights and assists mentally ill people with legal matters. The website contains numerous articles about these issues.

FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Books

Lucy Adamson, *The Voice Within—My Life with Schizophrenia*. Surrey, UK: Grosvenor House, 2013.

Shirley Brinkerhoff, *Schizophrenia*. Broomall, PA: Mason Crest, 2013.

Aimee Houser, *Tragedy in Tucson*. Minneapolis, MN: ABDO, 2012.

Carrie Iorizzo, *Schizophrenia and Other Psychotic Disorders*. New York: Crabtree, 2014.

Carla Mooney, *Mental Illness Research*. San Diego, CA: ReferencePoint, 2012.

Peggy J. Parks, *Schizophrenia*. San Diego, CA: ReferencePoint, 2010.

Internet Sources

Neel Burton, “A Brief History of Schizophrenia,” *Hide and Seek* (blog), *Psychology Today*, September 8, 2012. www.psychologytoday.com/blog/hide-and-seek/201209/brief-history-schizophrenia.

Scott O. Lilienfeld and Hal Arkowitz, “Living with Schizophrenia,” *Scientific American*, February 11, 2010. www.scientificamerican.com/article/living-with-schizophrenia.

Kathleen McAuliffe, “How Your Cat Is Making You Crazy,” *Atlantic*, March 2012. www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/03/how-your-cat-is-making-you-crazy/308873.

National Alliance on Mental Illness, “Schizophrenia,” 2015. www.nami.org/Template.cfm?Section=Schizophrenia9&Template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=117961.

National Institute of Mental Health, “Schizophrenia.” www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/schizophrenia/index.shtml.

National Institute of Mental Health, “Schizophrenia (Easy-to-Read).” www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/schizophrenia-easy-to-read/index.shtml.

INDEX

Note: Boldface page numbers indicate illustrations.

Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, 57

AKT1 gene, 32

American Civil Liberties Union, 60

American Psychiatric Association, 46

American Psychosis (Torrey), 60

Americans with Disabilities Act (1990), 42

Angermeyer, Matthias C., 42

anosognosia (lack of awareness), 17–18, 44

antibodies, 33

antipsychiatry movement, 6

antipsychotic drugs, 51–53

controversies about, 62–64

side effects of, 58

Atlantic (magazine), 35

Aurelianus, Caelius, 9

awareness, lack of, 17–18

Bazelon Center, 60

behavioral changes, 19–20

Behavior Genetics (journal), 30

Ben Behind His Voices (Kaye), 13

Bleuler, Eugen, 11

brain, 23–25, 26

abnormalities of, in schizophrenia, 25–26

inflammation in, 52

Breggin, Peter, 62–63

British Journal of Psychiatry, 44

Bryan, Patricia, 43–44

Cadigan, John, 45

caregivers

challenges for, 46–47

support resources for, 49

catechol-O-methyltransferase gene, 29

cats, *Toxoplasma gondii* infections and, 33, 34, 35

celiac syndrome, 62

Cell (journal), 31

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 34

Charpentier, Paul, 51

chlorpromazine, 51–52

choline, 64

chromosomes, 29

clozapine, 52

cognitive behavioral therapy, 54

cognitive rehabilitation, 54

cognitive training, 63

Columbia University, 36

Compeer Program, 43

Current Psychiatry Reports (journal), 25

deinstitutionalization, 5–7

delusions, 16, 43, 46

dementia praecox, 11

Dementia Praecox or the Group of

Schizophrenias (Bleuler), 11

deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA), 28, 31

diagnosis, criteria for, 21–22

Diagnosis: Schizophrenia (Miller and Mason), 25

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of

Mental Disorders (DSM-5), 15, 19, 22

distorted sense of self, 16

Dixon, Lisa B., 56

dopamine, 27

electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), 53–54

environment

gene interactions with, 31

triggers for schizophrenia in, 31–32

exercise, 44

Ezekiel (prophet), 10

Family-to-Family program (National Alliance on Mental Illness), 49

Flegr, Jaroslav, 35

Frese, Frederick, 44

Freud, Sigmund, 23

Friedman, Richard A., 7

functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), 25