

Schizophrenia: A Mental Health Guide

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● What is schizophrenia ?

→ Schizophrenia is a mental disorder in which the individual's interpretation of reality becomes very unreliable and jumbled. Schizophrenia is a term coined by the Swiss psychiatrist Eugene Bleuler, derived from the two Greek words 'Schizo' and 'Phrenia', meaning split and mind respectively. This can include hallucinating, which means they see or hear things others don't or delusions, which involves being firm about false beliefs. This can lead to fundamental changes in perceptions, mood and behaviour often having adverse and abnormal effects on a person's behaviour. Schizophrenia, though not curable, can be treated with appropriate and timely medical help. If an individual starts noticing themselves exhibiting symptoms of schizophrenia, it is of critical importance to consult a professional before complications start developing and the disorder reaches the point where it impairs daily functioning.

Schizophrenia is a disorder with a very wide variety of symptoms and types. The most common types of schizophrenia are as follows:

- 1. Paranoid Schizophrenia** - Paranoid schizophrenia, as the name suggests, is a type of schizophrenia characterised by an intense mistrust in the environment, reality and the people around. People experiencing this type of schizophrenia may constantly believe that someone is plotting or conspiring against them, they may believe they are in danger, that someone is 'out to get them'. They might hold these beliefs due to intrusive voices in their head that lead them to have such hallucinations and delusions. For e.g.- Jacob is an individual suffering from paranoid schizophrenia. Jacob is at a party with all his college friends, but every now and then, Jacob finds himself at unease and on high alert, because he can't help but shake the feeling that everyone at this party is whispering about him, conspiring against him and planning to do something shady and sinister.
- 2. Disorganised Schizophrenia** - As the name suggests, this type of schizophrenia is characterised by disorganised speech, behaviour and thinking. People experiencing this type of schizophrenia are often unable to form logical or well-thought out sentences since their pattern of thinking becomes very unfocused and nonsensical. This type causes impairing in daily functioning as well as in the emotional sense such that individuals do not look after their personal hygiene and are unable to give appropriate emotional responses. This type is also referred to as 'hebephrenic schizophrenia'. For e.g.- Rohan experiences effects of disorganised schizophrenia. Rohan does not look after himself very well, his appearance is always dishevelled and he tends to behave oddly in most situations. Rohan also tends to give quite peculiar responses, such as laughing when something serious is being discussed and he often keeps on rambling without ever reaching a point.
- 3. Catatonic Schizophrenia** - This type of schizophrenia is characterised by disruptions in movement, ranging between two extremes. When the individual is in a highly

active and excited state, their actions may be all over the place and purposeless, devoid of any productivity. On the other hand, a person experiencing this type can go into a major stupor, staying as still as a statue for extended periods of time. In this state, the person may exhibit shocking resistance towards anyone that tries to help them move.

4. **Undifferentiated Schizophrenia** - This disorder is characterised by a wide variety of symptoms that tend to fluctuate over a period of time. An individual might experience symptoms of the paranoid subtype, at other times, they might experience symptoms of the disorganised subtype and at times they might even experience symptoms of the catatonic subtype. Some have used the term 'mixed clinical syndrome' to describe this disorder since it is essentially a 'mix' of varying symptoms.

Common Signs and Symptoms

Schizophrenia comprises two types of symptoms namely, positive and negative symptoms. Positive symptoms refer to characteristics that are added to someone's state of being. Negative symptoms refer to characteristics that are removed from the person's state of being.

Positive Symptoms :

1. **Hallucinations** - Hallucinations refer to perceiving things that others don't. An individual might see or hear things that are not there at all. Hallucinations add to sensory perceptions i.e. - seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting or feeling. While hallucinations with these sensory perceptions do exist, auditory hallucinations are the most common.
2. **Delusions** - Delusions, to put it simply, are false ideas or beliefs. Individuals experiencing these symptoms may believe that they are being closely watched, that someone is plotting to harm them or that their food is poisoned, and all without any evidence to support these beliefs. Individuals might be too paranoid and suspicious, making them more and more closed off for communication.
3. **Disorganised thinking** - Disorganized thinking, as the name suggests, refers to a very profound disorganisation in one's thought process, making it extremely frustrating for the individual to follow a single line of thought at a time and clearly express their ideas. Imagine the train of thought as one that breaks apart and merges itself onto completely different tracks, reaching no particular station at all. The structure of language becomes very jumbled, making it hard for people around them to follow what they say.
4. **Abnormal Motor Behaviour** - Another symptom of schizophrenia is disorganisation in physical movements or motor behaviours. This can involve unusual positioning of the body which may be well out of the individual's awareness or control.

Negative Symptoms :

1. **Flat affect** - This refers to an inexpressive or blank face, or to put it simply, an inability to show emotion. A person might even lose something as fundamental as the ability to smile.

2. **Diminished speech** - In contrast to disorganised speech, diminished speech is when barely any speech is present. A person might communicate in a monosyllabic and monotonous manner.
3. **Social withdrawal** - A person might isolate themselves and avoid interacting with others.
4. **Lack of motivation** - An individual suffering from schizophrenia may lack motivation to do anything, even basic things such as looking after themselves and their sense of purpose in life might be significantly decreased.
5. **Alogia** - As a result of disorganised thinking, an individual might find it difficult to speak altogether, which is referred to as alogia.
6. **Apathy** - A very prominent symptom of schizophrenia, apathy refers to inability to care about people or events. Simply put, apathy is the inability to feel emotions on a deep, profound level.
7. **Anhedonia** - Anhedonia refers to the inability to feel or express any kind of pleasure or happiness.

Early Indicators

1. A very notable early indicator of schizophrenia can be noticeable changes in thinking patterns. The individual might find it difficult to focus, they might notice changes in their ability to concentrate and they might see themselves finding it more and more difficult to effectively follow a train of thought. These kinds of changes in thinking patterns are closely associated with the way schizophrenia affects the functioning of the brain, which is why it's a very important early indicator to look out for.
2. Another early warning sign of schizophrenia is social withdrawal. A person might start isolating themselves from others. Early on, individuals might seek time away from their friends and family, much rather preferring to spend time alone.
3. The individual may develop unusual beliefs such as thinking people are talking about them when they're not, thus leading to an increased level of mistrust towards people. In the case of schizophrenia, imagine the mind as a very unreliable and possessive best friend. It tries to tell you bad things about others and convince you that others want what's worst for you so that you can spend more and more time inside your own head and be with the mind.
4. An important early indicator to look out for with schizophrenia is a decline in self-confidence. A decline in self-confidence isn't the only warning sign, it comes with a lot of other baggage, such as neglecting simple self-care practices and dismissing basic personal hygiene.
5. Early indicators can also include changes in emotional expression. An individual might express an emotion that is completely inappropriate or unexpected for the given situation. It might also be the case that the individual's emotions are out of proportion, considering the situation. Or, the individual's emotional expression might be diminished. Any changes in emotional expression and the experience of emotions itself are important to look out for.
6. A very important early indicator of schizophrenia is a decline in academic or work performance. The individual's work or academic performance may show a worrying drop.

Relevant Stats

- According to WHO, schizophrenia affects about 24 million people worldwide i.e. 1 in every 300 people (0.32 %).

- More than 10 lakh cases of schizophrenia are found each year in India.
- According to recent statistics,
 - In India, schizophrenia affects approximately 1 in 200 to 1 in 250 people.
 - In the United States, it is estimated that 1 in 100 to 1 in 150 people are affected by schizophrenia.
- Looking at the statistics on schizophrenia with respect to age groups, we may notice that,
 - The peak onset of schizophrenia typically occurs in adulthood. In the age group of people ranging between 19-60 years, 1 in 100 to 1 in 150 individuals are affected by schizophrenia.
 - Though schizophrenia typically has an earlier onset, individuals might continue to experience symptoms later on in life too. In the age group of 61-80 years, the prevalence of schizophrenia is estimated to be around 1 in 200 to 1 in 250 people.

Preventative Measures

1. An important preventative measure for schizophrenia can be identifying and addressing the disorder before it gets worse. In today's day and age, there is a lot of stigma around mental health, but a disorder as serious as schizophrenia can be very debilitating and adversely affect an individual if it is neglected, which is why it is of crucial importance to get treatment if one notices clear signs and symptoms of schizophrenia.
2. Living a healthy lifestyle is also vital to avoiding most kinds of mental disorders. Maintaining a balanced diet, getting sufficient sleep and avoiding substance abuse at all costs can be a very important preventative measure for schizophrenia. It has been noted that substance abuse or use of cannabis can significantly increase the chances of schizophrenia, especially in those who have a predisposition to it.
3. Genes are considered the strongest risk factor for schizophrenia. A family history of schizophrenia can increase one's likelihood for developing it. This further stresses the importance of addressing the gravity of the disorder and taking efforts towards its treatment when clear signs of the disorder are present.

Ice-Breakers

1. Genuine and empathetic statements always go a long way when trying to initiate a conversation with an individual suffering from a mental disorder. You can express genuine interest in their experience of the disorder and how they have been navigating their thoughts recently. This combined with encouraging them to share their perspective of things can make space for meaningful and fruitful conversation.
2. Making your intentions clear on the matter of trying to understand their struggle with schizophrenia can foster a supportive environment. Ensuring them that all you're trying to do is understand their experience better can help build a sense of trust, which, as we have seen, might be difficult for an individual with schizophrenia to do.
3. Asking open-ended questions about their experiences is also a great way to facilitate conversation between the affected individual and oneself. Asking them how they've been dealing with the challenges schizophrenia presents, or asking them to share something they wish others knew while trying to understand schizophrenia, or just in general, asking how

they are navigating themselves through this can significantly help in facilitating effective communication.

4. Sharing one's own learning journey is also a very important icebreaker. Letting the individual know that you have taken great efforts to understand mental health, especially schizophrenia and wish to understand what they want others to acknowledge about their experience can make way for a circle of comfort and further learning.
5. Acknowledging and understanding one's struggle without any criticism or judgement is a crucial practice for approaching a conversation about any mental illness, not just schizophrenia. If one is judgemental towards the person without knowing any better or trying to understand them, the person's sense of diffidence and mistrust might worsen. Dismissing them as 'crazy' can make matters so much worse, which is why non-judgmental listening is vital for effective communication.