

UNDERSTANDING
MENTAL HEALTH

A GUIDE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE
WITH A LOVED ONE EXPERIENCING
SCHIZOPHRENIA





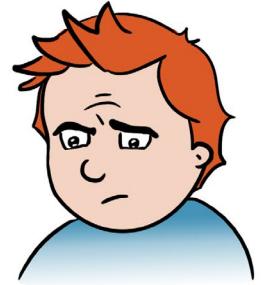
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This booklet was adapted from materials developed by Sabin Sebastian MD (Birmingham, Alabama) and the South Carolina Department of Mental Health, and updated with consultation from Mrs. Porter's Psychology 12 Semester 2 Class (2025) at Chilliwack Secondary School.

We acknowledge that the various land on which BCSS operates and supports families is the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territories of British Columbia's Indigenous Peoples. We are honoured and privileged to share this land, and are committed to reconciliation, decolonization, and building relationships in our communities.

"I can't understand her, my sister speaks and acts so weird, she seems to talk to herself and they say she is 'paranoid'. I have no idea what is going on with her."

- Mark

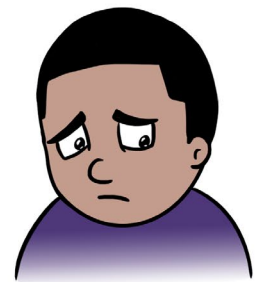


"It's such a drag! My dad can't come and watch my games. My friends say my dad is strange. They won't come visit me because they are scared of him. Sometimes I am too, so I can't blame them, I guess."

- Denise

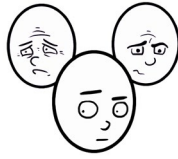
"When's mom gonna get well? Daddy says she's ill. Mommy can't work anymore, she is acting real different. She does not seem like my mom anymore. I am scared of her sometimes."

- Miles



**WHAT'S HAPPENING WITH ALL THESE FAMILY MEMBERS?
THEY ALL HAVE AN ILLNESS CALLED SCHIZOPHRENIA.**

WHAT IS IT?



Schizophrenia is a brain illness.

When someone has schizophrenia, their brain is not working right and their thinking gets mixed up.

Sometimes they might hear voices talking to them, or see things that aren't really there.

They might believe things that aren't true, like thinking someone is trying to poison their food or the TV is talking to them.

Since the messages in their brain are mixed up, their speech can get jumbled up and they might say things that don't make sense.

They can also have trouble with their memory or focusing on work/school.

They might find it really hard to do things to take care of themselves like bathing, and they might stop doing things they used to enjoy like hobbies or spending time with family and friends.

So what is happening with all these family members?

They all have an illness called *schizophrenia*

For real?

Don't worry! When you are done reading this, you will know more about schizophrenia than some grown-ups know...

What does it mean to have schizophrenia?

If you know someone who has schizophrenia, you may already have some idea about what they are going through.

Maybe you've noticed that sometimes they do things that seem strange to you.

Maybe they've told you a bit about what it's like for them to live with schizophrenia.

Let's try to understand what it might feel like to have schizophrenia:

Say you are sitting alone, and you hear someone talking to you. You look around, but there is no one there. The voice tells you all kinds of stuff that really annoys you. What would happen?

You'd be pretty angry!

You might find yourself arguing with the voice and talking back to it. If someone were watching you, they'd think you were pretty strange. They probably wouldn't understand why you were acting that way.

That would be a really bad experience!

What would happen if you also started believing that people were out to 'get you' or poison your food?

You'd be pretty suspicious.

What if you tried to watch TV and the TV talked back to you?! What if you felt people were reading your mind?

Life would be really difficult...

What if you then lost interest in everything?

You no longer could care for your family.

What if you lost the ability to feel love or to smile or the desire to work or play?

Things are not looking too good for you, right?

Unfortunately, this can happen when someone has schizophrenia.

**REMEMBER,
THEY AREN'T
CHOOSING TO
ACT THIS WAY.**



**NO ONE
WANTS TO
BE ILL.**

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

If you find yourself with lots of questions about schizophrenia, you're not alone.

Here are some questions people often ask...

WHAT CAUSES SCHIZOPHRENIA?

Just like the body, the brain can get sick too, but you can't catch schizophrenia from someone else like you catch a cold.

Mental illnesses like schizophrenia are caused by a combination of different things. A person's genes can make them more likely to develop schizophrenia. Genes are the building blocks that make us who we are and determine things like the colour of our hair or eyes.

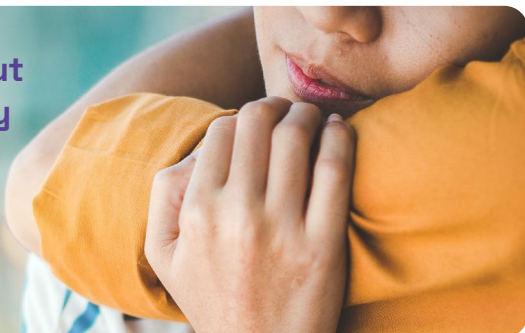
If a person has genes that make them more likely to develop schizophrenia, things that happen in their life can add to this possibility and cause them to develop schizophrenia or make the illness worse. For example, if someone goes through a difficult event like the death of a loved one or a car accident.

Using drugs, particularly cannabis, and alcohol can also make someone more likely to develop schizophrenia if they already have genes that make them at risk.

WILL I GET SCHIZOPHRENIA?

Just because you have a family member with schizophrenia, does not mean you will get schizophrenia.

If you're worried about yourself or notice any changes in your thoughts, feelings or behaviour, talk to an adult you trust.



IS IT MY FAULT? ABSOLUTELY NOT!

Sometimes, kids wonder if they did something to make their loved one ill or if they could've done something to stop their loved one from developing schizophrenia.

Remember – kids are not the cause of these illnesses!

Schizophrenia is no one's fault.


WILL THEY GET BETTER?

Just like many other illnesses, there are ways to treat schizophrenia.

Medications can help people with schizophrenia feel better. They can take away the voices and the strange experiences.

Counselling or therapy can also help people with schizophrenia understand their illness and learn new ways to deal with problems.

People with schizophrenia have to take treatment for a long time, usually their whole lives.



**THEY MAY BECOME ILL,
GET BETTER,
BECOME ILL AGAIN,
AND THEN GET BETTER AGAIN.**

Schizophrenia can be hard to treat, because some medications only work for some people or only work some of the time, but doctors can help people find the right medication for them.

There are a lot of people working hard to find a better treatment for schizophrenia. Maybe you will become a doctor and find better treatments!

WORDS FOR UNDERSTANDING

Antidepressants: Medications that are used to treat depression. These medications can help people feel better, as well as sleep and eat better.

Antipsychotics: A group of medications that are used to treat psychosis, which is when a person has a hard time knowing what is real and what is not real. These medications help people think more clearly and take away symptoms like hallucinations and delusions. Antipsychotics can help people who have schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and other mental illnesses.

Delusions: When a person strongly believes something that is not true and they cannot be convinced it is not true. Other people do not share this same belief. For example, the person may think someone is trying to poison their food or the police are after them. Delusions can happen with some mental illnesses.

Hallucinations: Seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, and/or feeling things that are not really there. A person who is having hallucinations really believes that they are sensing these things. Hallucinations can happen with some mental illnesses.

Hereditary: The traits we are born with that make us like our parents and close relatives. For example, the colour of our eyes or hair, or how tall we will become. We can also inherit how physically or mentally healthy we will be.

Paranoia: When people fear someone or fear something will harm them. It is usually a fear of something that will not happen, but it is hard for the person to understand that this will not happen.

Phobias: When people have a fear of certain things like places, animals, water, high buildings, etc. and avoid these things because their fear is so strong.

Psychosis: When a person is out of touch with reality or is unable to tell the difference between what is real and what is just in their mind. For example, they may believe that things are happening when they are not. It affects how they think, feel, and behave. Psychosis can happen with mental illnesses like schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, or from other things like using drugs.

TALK ABOUT MENTAL ILLNESS

Mental illnesses have to do with how a person's brain works. They are illnesses just like diabetes and cancer, but mental illnesses are treatable. With treatment like medication, therapy, and rest, many people will learn to manage their illness and can work and enjoy life. As with other illnesses, some do not fully recover and may continue to need support.

Schizophrenia: A brain disease that affects the way a person thinks, feels, and relates to others. It makes it hard for the person with the illness to tell what is real and what is not real. Their thinking gets mixed up and they have hallucinations (seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, and feeling things that aren't real) and delusions (they believe things that are not true).

Bipolar Disorder: An illness that affects a person's moods. Sometimes a person can feel very, very sad (depression) or, at other times, they can be very energetic (mania). Moods can be mild, moderate, or severe and can also include a change in the way a person thinks and behaves.

Major Depression: When a person feels very low or sad most of the time. Symptoms may include: sleeping too much, not being able to sleep (even when tired), not finding anything fun or interesting, and even not feeling hungry. The person may have very little energy and not be able to do what they usually do.

Anxiety Disorders: When a person has a lot of worry (much more than average) about things that may or may not happen. It can sometimes cause things like stomach aches, pains in other parts of the body, and shortness of breath. Sometimes people may fear things like places, animals, etc. and avoid those things because their fear is so strong.

PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder): This may appear after a very upsetting or shocking event in someone's life. Sometimes they may be in a situation that reminds them of that event and their brain may be telling their body to "run" in order to protect themselves, even when they are actually safe. They may have trouble sleeping, be easily afraid, be grumpy, or always looking for dangerous situations.

OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder): A person with OCD often cannot stop worrying, no matter how much they want to. Sometimes these worries make them do certain things over and over again, such as cleaning, touching things, or organizing.

Substance Use Disorder: An illness that causes a person to use substances like alcohol or drugs in a way that leads to problems in their life. They may find it very difficult to stop using the substance even when they want to stop. They may have trouble with their health, their relationships with other people, going to work or school, and taking care of themselves because of their substance use.

CANNABIS & SCHIZOPHRENIA

While it is legal for people aged 19 and older to use cannabis in BC, as with alcohol, cannabis use may have both negative and positive effects. This is particularly true for people who have a genetic vulnerability to mental illness.

INCREASED RISK

Cannabis has been associated with an increased risk of psychosis and schizophrenia for people with a genetic vulnerability (family history) to serious and persistent mental health illness.

Some people who use large amounts of cannabis, even without such risk factors, may experience a psychotic episode. These episodes usually resolve relatively quickly. But for some people, the episode may trigger further episodes that can later contribute to a diagnosis of schizophrenia or other persistent mental illness.

UNDERSTANDING SUBSTANCE USE

People have been using cannabis (weed, marijuana, pot) and other drugs, like alcohol and caffeine, throughout history. People use these drugs as tools for a variety of reasons, including to feel good and to explore new experiences. Some people use these substances to try and deal with symptoms of their mental illness, but drugs and alcohol can often make the symptoms of mental illness worse.

While low to moderate cannabis use has less potential for harm, prolonged or heavy use is associated with significant harm, especially in youth under the age of 25. Heavy cannabis use by youth is often a way to cope with stress or deal with unpleasant feelings, but cannabis use can also lead to negative mental health outcomes.

HOW YOU CAN HELP YOUR LOVED ONE

Recognize the person may be using cannabis as a tool to deal with symptoms related to schizophrenia. This will help you engage in dialogue that explores the person's own experiences rather than focusing on the drug use itself. This way the person can reflect on the reasons for their drug use, its impact on their life and other tools that may be available.

Authors: BC Schizophrenia Society and Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research

CONCURRENT DISORDERS

A concurrent disorder is when a person has two separate but related diagnoses that occur at the same time, for example a mental illness and a substance use disorder.

THERE ARE FOUR WAYS THAT MENTAL ILLNESSES AND SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS OCCUR TOGETHER:

A mental illness comes first. A person uses substances, like alcohol or other drugs to help them deal with troubling symptoms of a mental illness.

A substance use disorder comes first. A person uses a substance that triggers symptoms of a mental illness, like depression or psychosis.

Both problems start at the same time. A mental illness and a substance use disorder are triggered by the same event, like a traumatic experience.

The problems start separately. A mental illness and substance use disorder both start separately, but have the same risk factors, like genetics or a difficult environment.

SYMPTOMS:

- It can be hard to tell the difference between a mental illness and substance use disorder, because many symptoms look the same. Substances can hide symptoms of a mental illness, and substances can make a mental illness worse.

TREATMENT:

- Treatment is required for both diagnoses.
- Combination of medication and therapy.
- Exact treatment depends on the specific mental illness and substance use disorder, how severe each problem is and how the problems interact.

More information about concurrent disorders:
keltymentalhealth.ca/concurrent-disorders

REMINDER

Here are some important things to remember if someone in your life has a mental illness like schizophrenia...



IT'S NOT YOUR FAULT

No one can cause another person to have a mental illness.

YOUR FEELINGS ARE OKAY

You may have a lot of different feelings. It's okay to feel sad, lonely, angry, confused or however you feel. Other people feel the same way.

TALK TO SOMEONE YOU TRUST

Share your feelings with someone you trust – a parent, grandparent, aunt or uncle, counsellor or teacher.

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

Find things you enjoy doing. Play a sport, read, bake, dance, make art, spend time with friends, anything you find fun that helps you relax.

IT CAN GET BETTER

With medication and help from doctors, counsellors, family and friends, people with mental illness do get better.

IT'S NO JOKE

People should never make fun of mental illness.

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

It can be helpful to learn more about mental illness, so you understand what is happening for your loved one. Then it won't seem so scary or confusing.

WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE?

The following resources have more information about brain illness and how to cope when someone you love has a brain illness:

Kids, Tweens & Teens in Control Groups

Support and education groups for children and youth ages 8-18, who have a loved one with a brain illness and/or addiction.

bcssyouth.org

BC Schizophrenia Society

Information about schizophrenia and other brain illnesses.

bcss.org

COPMI (Children of Parents with a Mental Illness)

Information and videos about brain illness for young people who have a parent with a brain illness.

copmi.net.au/kids-young-people

HeretoHelp

Information and resources about mental health and substance use.

heretohelp.bc.ca

NEED HELP?

Kids Help Phone

Call 1-800-668-6868 or
Text CONNECT to 686868
kidshelpphone.ca

KUU-US Crisis Line – First Nations and Indigenous specific crisis line

Call 1-800-588-8717

YouthinBC – Online crisis chat service

youthinbc.com

Crisis Centre Suicide Line

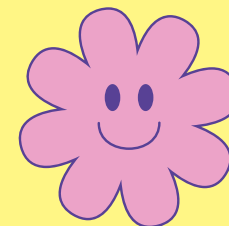
Call 1-800-SUICIDE
(1-800-784-2433)

REMEMBER THE 3 C'S

I can't CAUSE it

I can't CHANGE it

I can CARE for myself



THINGS I CAN DO TO HELP MYSELF

In an emergency, I can call:

If I need someone to talk to, I can call:

If I am looking for information, I can call:

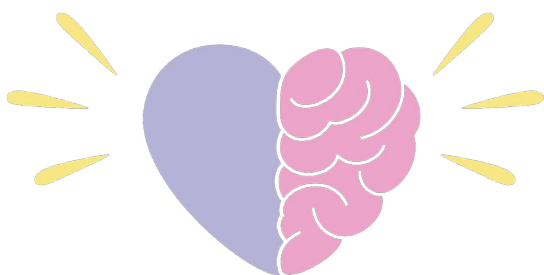
One person I can go to for help is:

Times when I may need help:

Things I can do to help myself feel better:

NOTES

You can care
for yourself



YOUR MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS

For more information on supporting families and friends with mental illness, please contact:

British Columbia Schizophrenia Society & BCSS YOUTH

1100 – 1200 West 73rd Avenue
Vancouver, BC V6P 6G5

Phone: 604-270-7841

Toll Free: 1-888-888-0029

Email: info@bcss.org

Websites: bcss.org | bcssyouth.org