

## **SCHIZOPHRENIA-WHAT IS IT AND WHAT CAN YOU DO TO MAKE THINGS BETTER**

### **WHAT IS SCHIZOPHRENIA?**

- ◆ Schizophrenia is an illness due to problems in the way the brain normally functions.
- ◆ As a result, your family member with schizophrenia has experiences which seem completely real to him/her but are hard to understand for other people. Since your affected family member cannot fully explain what is happening, it is not easy for other people to realize that many of the odd or upsetting things that they do are caused by the illness.
- ◆ Schizophrenia is a relatively infrequent illness- about 1 in 2000 people suffer from it at any point of time.
- ◆ The illness starts mainly in young people between the ages of 15 and 30; however, it may start at other ages as well.
- ◆ Both **men and women** develop the illness.

### **WHAT ARE THE IMPORTANT SYMPTOMS OF SCHIZOPHRENIA?**

In schizophrenia there are a number of changes in:

#### Behaviors:

- Spending a lot of time by themselves and not interacting with family members or friends like before
- Becoming suspicious and getting into arguments with family members, friends and strangers for no obvious reason
- Not taking care of their personal hygiene or their clothes
- Talking to themselves
- Changes in their sleeping patterns like staying up late at nights or spending a lot of time in bed
- Not making eye contact while speaking or speaking in a strange way that other cannot follow

#### Thoughts:

- Having odd and unusual beliefs that people (neighbors/ family members) are planning to harm him/ her
- That people are talking bad things about him/her behind their backs
- That people can read their minds
- That he/she is receiving special messages from the TV or radio

- Having difficulty in thinking logically
- Difficulty in concentrating and remembering things
- Becoming uninterested in things that they would do enthusiastically earlier

#### Sensations:

- Hearing voices talking to them when no one is around
- Unusual taste or smells
- Unusual sensations in the body

#### Emotions:

- Being angry or fearful most of the time for no obvious reason
- Being sad and unhappy most of the time
- Becoming dull and showing little reaction to things happening around them

#### Social relationships:

- Becoming isolated from family members and friends
- Not wanting to go to family functions
- Becoming less caring towards their spouse and children

#### Work performance:

- Not wanting to go to work or college
- Losing their job and spending time at home
- Not carrying out daily household activities as before

However, there is no one symptom or test that can be used to identify someone as having schizophrenia; usually a combination of the symptoms and the time that they have been present for (at least more than a month continuously) are taken into account for this purpose.

### **What happens to people with schizophrenia over time?**

- ◆ Most people will **get better with treatment**. They will think more clearly and many of the unusual ideas will go away.
- ◆ About **one in four people** have an episode of schizophrenia from which they make a complete recovery and then stay well for years.
- ◆ A small number of people with schizophrenia **do not respond to treatment** easily and can have a long and difficult illness.
- ◆ Most people will recover from an acute attack but will have periods when the symptoms come back again. These periods are called **relapses** which can happen at times when there is more stress on the person.

- ◆ The illness will be controlled better if the family members are informed about the illness.
- ◆ People with schizophrenia will get better sooner if the family is supportive.

### ***WHAT CAUSES SCHIZOPHRENIA?***

Scientific research has identified that there are a number of factors which contribute to the illness:

#### **1) Genetic or inherited reasons:**

- ◆ Schizophrenia can be **inherited** and is seen more commonly in particular families.
- ◆ This does not mean that the affected member should not have children as most children of a parent with schizophrenia *do not develop the illness*.
- ◆ If one family member has the illness, it does not mean that others will also invariably develop the illness.
- ◆ Schizophrenia can also occur when there are no other relatives who have it.

#### **2) Imbalance of certain chemicals in the brain:**

- ◆ Schizophrenia is caused by disturbances in the usual working of the brain.
- ◆ These disturbances are due to changes in certain chemicals in the brain.
- ◆ The abnormal levels (more or less than usual) of these chemicals lead to the changes in behavior and experiences seen in schizophrenia.

#### **3) Relation with stress:**

- ◆ Stress caused by problems at home or work can sometimes bring on the illness.
- ◆ Some events such as a death in the family, loss of job or breakup of relationship can make schizophrenia worse or cause a relapse of symptoms.

#### **4) Schizophrenia is NOT caused by:**

- Evil spirits

- Black magic/witchcraft
- 'Fate' or 'bad karma'
- Studying too much

### **What can be done to manage the illness better?**

Schizophrenia can be treated quite effectively with a number of treatments. However, there is no single treatment that can 'cure' schizophrenia. Instead, like other diseases like high blood pressure and diabetes, schizophrenia is best treated with both medicines and changes in the person and family's behavior and lifestyles. Schizophrenia needs to be managed over a period of time. As a family member you can help your ill relative get better gradually by:

- Understanding the illness better
- Encouraging your relative to meet with the treating doctor regularly
- Encouraging your relative continue with the medicines as prescribed
- Helping your relative get back to his/her usual roles as far as possible
- Taking care of your personal health and well being
- Feeling confident to deal with the stigma and discrimination that you and your relative might experience