

What is Schizophrenia?

"I'm living my life with mental illness. You know, what you say, what she say I can't control that. I can control what I do and say and how I live with my mental illness."

Shelby has Schizophrenia, a long-term mental health condition that affects how he perceives reality and manages his emotions. Someone living with Schizophrenia may see, hear, feel, or believe things that do not exist. They may behave strangely – talking to themselves, wandering aimlessly, dressing oddly. Schizophrenia affects a person's ability to think clearly, to make decisions, and to relate to other people.

"Schizophrenia is a disorder in which the connections within the brain have been severely disrupted or they weren't formed properly in the first place."

"And it is because it's a disorder of the mind; the mind really controls behavior. And that's why people's behavior changes when they have the illness."

The symptoms of Schizophrenia can be broken down into three categories: Positive, Negative, and Cognitive. Positive symptoms don't mean that they are good. Rather, a Positive symptom adds on to a person's normal experience. Examples are hallucinations, seeing, hearing, or feeling things that aren't there, or delusions, firmly believing things that aren't true.

Negative symptoms take away from a person's normal experience and often look like depression. A person might feel very flat or unemotional. They might withdraw from other people. They might lose interest in activities or stop showering and taking care of themselves. Cognitive symptoms affect a person's ability to think clearly and may include disorganized thinking, confusing speech or stopping mid-action to begin another unrelated activity.

"Hallucinations, hearing voices. I couldn't sit still. I'd see figures running across the desk."

Paul Beier is no stranger to the symptoms of Schizophrenia, an extremely disabling mental illness. He began experiencing symptoms in high school but was not diagnosed until he was 35.

"It was frustrating not to be able to get the right diagnosis probably because I had deep down inside me felt if I really wait this out, I'll become Paul again, that I will get better. And it took a lot longer than I ever imagined, but it was worth it."

Schizophrenia, which affects about one percent of the population, often appears during a person's teens or early twenties. While the exact cause of Schizophrenia is unknown, it is believed a person's genes and environmental factors may be involved. Other risk factors can include having an immediate relative with Schizophrenia, using mind-altering drugs, complications during pregnancy such as exposure to infection or malnutrition, and how your brain is wired. Shelby blames his illegal drug use.

"My drugs brought out my mental illness. It made it worse and worse and worse. In and out of prison. In and out of hospitals. It was terrible. I never forget them days. I survived because I put it in my mind and my heart."

In order to diagnose Schizophrenia, other conditions must first be ruled out. These might include other medical issues, drug use, or Bipolar Disorder. The major symptoms of Schizophrenia include hallucinations, delusions or disorganized thinking or behavior, or negative symptoms. To be diagnosed, 2 or more of these symptoms must occur together for at least one month. All symptoms must last for six months as well as get

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in the way of functioning. People with Schizophrenia often don't recognize their symptoms, or they might feel like others are trying to harm them. So, they isolate themselves and don't seek out help.

"The only way that you'll know I have Schizophrenia is by interacting with me. So, if I'm not communicating with you that I'm suffering from hallucinations because I may not realize that the hallucinations aren't real. If I don't realize that I'm developing these symptoms that align with schizophrenia and I don't communicate that to a health professional or somebody from my school or somebody with my family, then all that you'll observe is that I'm slowly retracting."

Treatment for Schizophrenia depends on the symptoms and may include medication, Talk Therapy, lifestyle changes, or a combination of all three. Finding a supportive community can also be very helpful for recovery. There is a network of social clubs across the U.S. for people with mental illness. Supportive friends and family can also help.

"Support is very important. I never experienced that. I never knew of things like that. Support, it was given to me. And, um, it made me a better person."

"Somebody that has schizophrenia has a variety of needs and so their support network, the availability of counseling to help that individual recognize their symptoms, cope with their symptoms, is a near requirement."

"There are so many people leading productive and rewarding lives with Schizophrenia."

It may take some time to find the best treatment, but there is hope if you seek professional help.

"It may not be the way you had originally envisioned your life to go. Your life is going to be different because like any illness it's, it is a serious illness and it's going to take time and energy to manage it. But it doesn't mean that you can't manage it and that you can't go back to doing the things you love to do."