

Schizophrenia: Understanding Hallucinations and Delusions

New Yorker Michelle Hammer lives with Schizophrenia, a mental health condition that affects how a person understands reality. For Michelle, it can cause her to hear voices. People living with Schizophrenia may see, hear, or feel things that don't exist. These are called hallucinations.

"It's almost like a daydream, but it's a really intense daydream where I think I'm somewhere else and I'm talking to other people and then all of a sudden I'm somewhere else on the subway or somewhere else in the street and I don't know how I got there."

Hallucinations affect the senses. A person with schizophrenia will often hear voices or see things that aren't there. Sometimes they may feel, taste, or smell things that aren't there.

"There are other disorders that have hallucinations. But what makes Schizophrenia, so debilitating is that my hallucinations, I don't realize they're not real in most cases."

Paul Beier has Schizophrenia. He suffers from another common symptom, delusions – firmly believing things that are not true.

"I thought aliens were trying to control me at one time. I thought they put a transmitter in my left eye. And I was walking around, and they were studying the planet Earth through my vision as a transmitter from my brain to their spaceship."

Delusions fall into two categories: Bizarre - situations that are impossible such as believing aliens have invaded your brain or non-bizarre, situations that are possible but aren't based in fact, such as believing the FBI is investigating you. Because delusions are often troubling, they may lead to paranoia, a belief that someone or something is trying to harm you.

"One time, my apartment was so messy. I had banana peels on the floor because I was so worried somebody was going to break into my apartment. I was hoping they would slip on the banana peels."

"Paranoia is the most horrible feeling in the entire world. I absolutely hate it. And when I was younger, not as experienced with medicine, I would let the paranoia go and go and go and go, and it would just start saying like 'don't take your medicine. You don't need your medicine. Everybody's lying to you.' I think the difference between before and now is that now I'm aware that those paranoid thoughts are 100 percent fake. And when I was younger, I believed them."

With a combination of medication and Talk Therapy, people like Michelle can manage their hallucinations and delusions and lead happy and productive lives. Antipsychotic medications work in the brain to help control the symptoms of schizophrenia. And Talk Therapy can help a person with Schizophrenia cope better, and perhaps help them identify whether what they are experiencing is a hallucination or delusion by comparing it to the experiences of other people.

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“Schizophrenia is a very difficult illness. No doubt about it. But people do learn to live with it, and they learn to manage the symptoms, and they learn to recognize that, that it could be a hallucination. And they learn how to check it to find out oh, I thought I heard somebody. Did anyone else hear that? So once people learn how to manage those symptoms and once people learn how to check and question, then it becomes much less debilitating.”

There is no cure for Schizophrenia, but Michelle and Paul are proof that it can be treated and managed with the help of mental health professionals.

“When you think of Schizophrenia in New York City, you automatically think of the homeless people hanging out by the subway begging for money. So, I’m just trying to show people that, that, that’s not the case; that people can thrive and live well with a mental illness. It doesn’t mean your life is over.”

“I feel in some ways that Schizophrenia has made me a happier person. Because I went through all that. And I feel appreciative towards my life that, for this time being, I can do the things I can do.”