

Treatments for Schizophrenia

“Schizophrenic NYC made by me. A Schizophrenic New Yorker just trying to change the way New York City sees mental health.”

Michelle Hammer lives with Schizophrenia, a serious mental health condition that affects how she understands reality.

“I leave reality and I like just zone out in my head where I think a whole different situation is happening and it’s almost just like this is here, that’s there, and I’m not here anymore. It’s just kind of like being in a different place. It’s hard to even explain. You’re just not in reality. You’re just gone.”

Many people with Schizophrenia find themselves homeless or hospitalized after finding success with treatment, Michelle is now working to change how people talk about mental illness.

“I want to tell the world I have Schizophrenia, and I want to try to make an open dialogue and get people talking about mental health. Spreading awareness through the medium of artwork and clothing.”

The cause of Schizophrenia is unknown, and it cannot be cured, but the symptoms can be managed with the right treatment. There are 3 categories of symptoms: Positive, or things added to a person’s usual experience, such as hallucinations and delusions; Negative, or things that take away from a person’s usual experience, such as social withdrawal or lack of emotion; and Cognitive, or things that affect a person’s thoughts and behavior.

“We do know that the chemicals in the brain that are sending messages from one area of the brain to the other are not functioning properly when people have the illness. And that’s what medication can help with.”

Antipsychotic medication is most commonly used with Schizophrenia to treat the positive symptoms of hallucinations and delusions. Mood stabilizers and antidepressants may be used to improve the effects of antipsychotic medication. It may take some time to find the right medications and the right dose that work for you, so it is important to be patient.

“It’s really important to stress that with Schizophrenia there is a lot of individual differences in how somebody will respond. So, unfortunately there is this almost necessary period to where you work very closely with your physician to try to identify the medication that works best for you.”

For Paul Beier, that meant years of trying to find the right combination of medications and therapy.

“Deep down I always had hope though that, that I could, you know, figure this out. I could get better, or I could go into recovery. I just kept seeking treatment. And cooperating with the doctors.”

It can also be hard to stay on medication. Someone living with Schizophrenia may not realize they are experiencing symptoms. They may believe the medication will harm them, be experiencing side effects, or they might think they don’t need it anymore.

“It’s very common to want to stop taking medication. And that’s a good question. Talk to your doctor about that. Review the pros and cons. Usually when people stop taking their medicine, their symptoms return.”

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Throughout college, Michelle struggled with her medication. But when her lacrosse coach encouraged her to go back on her meds.

“My whole demeanor changed. I decided I wasn’t going to be that person that’s going to go off the meds. I just accepted that I needed medicine and then come January she was like, we noticed a change in you, do you want to be captain. I was like, yeah.”

Talk Therapy is another form of treatment. This might be Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Social Skills training, Family therapy, Vocational therapy or Cognitive remediation to improve attention, memory, social cognition and decision making. For Paul, Talk Therapy helped push him to pursue his dreams. Since he was young, he hoped to earn his black belt in karate. His mental health struggles delayed that dream, but with the support of his therapist and his family, he began karate again.

“I stuck it out and at about the age of 50, I got my black belt. And people were a little shocked at how good I did.”

Talk Therapy was essential in Shelby Manuel’s recovery, too. His Schizophrenia, complicated by a drug addiction, landed him in hospitals and prison before he found treatment that worked for him and got him back to enjoying his life as a grandpa.

“When I do have them bad thoughts, them sad feelings, them depression I talk to my doctor. She’s everything to me.”

Lifestyle changes can also help including: Getting enough sleep and going to bed at the same time, eating well, exercising, limiting or stopping the use of alcohol, tobacco, or illicit drugs, using relaxation techniques such as deep breathing or meditation, and finding supportive friends and family. Both Michelle and Paul find that artwork helps them, too. Hobbies can boost self-esteem.

“It’s mostly just when I feel anxious, I just start like losing myself in drawing. It just calms me down.”

“When you’re in that zone of doing artwork, it makes you lose your problems in your daily life.”

Even with treatment, relapse is common. However, studies show that those who are determined to manage their Schizophrenia can live successful lives.

“Don’t give up. Don’t give up no matter what happens.”