

# Educate Your Patient

## Processing Your Schizophrenia Diagnosis

Being diagnosed with schizophrenia can feel very overwhelming. Even if you have experienced unusual thoughts or behavior for a long time, it still may be difficult to understand or accept this diagnosis.



## What does it mean to have schizophrenia?

Schizophrenia is a mental disorder in which people experience unusual thoughts. It also affects perception, mood, and behavior. Schizophrenia is caused by problems in brain function.<sup>1</sup>

Schizophrenia affects about 1% of the population—this means that 1 in 100 people have this condition. You are not alone. Anyone can be diagnosed with schizophrenia. It affects both men and women of all ethnicities.<sup>1,2</sup>

The period of time during which people with schizophrenia experience symptoms is called an episode.<sup>3</sup> People with schizophrenia often experience their first episode in their 20s or

early 30s. Men are more likely to experience symptoms in their early 20s.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, there is a stigma associated with mental illness in society. People with schizophrenia are often thought of as “violent” or “unpredictable.” You may be called names like “psychotic” because of your symptoms. However, it’s important to remember that this stigma is based on misconceptions about the condition rather than facts.<sup>4</sup> There are many treatments available that can help you manage your symptoms. With treatment, many people with schizophrenia can live fulfilling lives.<sup>1</sup>

## What does schizophrenia feel like?

Each person with schizophrenia has different symptoms; no 2 people have the same experience. There are 3 main types of symptoms—positive, negative, and cognitive. You may not have all of these symptoms or experience all of them at the same time.<sup>3</sup>

### Positive symptoms

These symptoms, such as psychosis, are called “positive” because they are abnormally present in people who have schizophrenia.<sup>5</sup>

If you are experiencing positive symptoms, you may:

- Experience hallucinations, which means that you will see or hear things that aren’t really there; this can also affect your sense of touch, smell, or taste<sup>6</sup>
- Experience delusions, or unusual thoughts or beliefs<sup>6</sup>
- Have trouble organizing your thoughts<sup>6</sup>
- Experience changes in perception, like seeing distorted shapes<sup>6</sup>
- Have trouble speaking, so other people may not be able to understand you<sup>3</sup>
- Act differently than you usually do, and sometimes exhibit strange behavior<sup>3</sup>

### Negative symptoms

These symptoms, such as social withdrawal, are called “negative” because they are abnormally absent in people who do not have schizophrenia.<sup>5</sup>

If you are experiencing negative symptoms, you may:

- No longer enjoy or participate in things you normally enjoy<sup>1</sup>
- Have trouble experiencing or expressing emotions<sup>3</sup>
- Feel anxious or angry<sup>3</sup>
- Have trouble sleeping<sup>3</sup>
- Not want to eat very much<sup>3</sup>

### Cognitive symptoms

These symptoms refer to problems with organizing thoughts and speech.<sup>5</sup>

If you are experiencing cognitive symptoms, you may:

- Be more forgetful<sup>7</sup>
- Have trouble paying attention<sup>7</sup>
- Have trouble planning<sup>7</sup>
- Experience difficulty completing daily tasks<sup>3</sup>
- Have trouble staying in school or keeping a job<sup>3</sup>

Remember that this disease is treatable. It’s not your fault that you have schizophrenia. There are many things you can do to help manage your symptoms.<sup>1,4</sup>

**Reach out to your family or friends for help if you have thoughts of harming yourself or others, or call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline for information at 800-273-8255.**

## How can schizophrenia be treated?

Once you are diagnosed, your doctor will create a treatment plan that could include both talk therapy and medication.

You may not like the idea of taking medications. However, they can be very helpful. Medication can help most people with schizophrenia manage symptoms and help prevent relapse. There are many different types of medications available for schizophrenia, so your healthcare provider might need you to try a few different options before they can identify what works best for you. Everyone responds to medications differently.<sup>8</sup> It is important to take your medication as prescribed by your doctor. You'll need to continue taking your medication as prescribed even after you feel better. Medications are not as effective if they are not taken regularly.

A relapse is when your symptoms come back or get worse. During a relapse, you may have to go to the hospital for a period of time. Relapses can also impact function and lower quality of life. Staying on top of your treatment plan is the best way you can try to prevent a relapse.<sup>9</sup>

Discuss any questions you may have with your doctor. Sometimes medications can cause side effects. When experiencing any side effects, consult your healthcare provider as soon as possible.<sup>2</sup>

Schizophrenia is a complex disease, and your treatment plan may change over time.

## How do you live with schizophrenia?

Depending on your symptoms and overall function, you may be able to continue working or going to school. However, it will take time to adjust to taking your medications, going to therapy, and keeping on top of your symptoms.<sup>3,7</sup>

It can be difficult to talk to family or friends about your diagnosis. You may be afraid that they will criticize you or put you down because of your condition. Remember that your health is private. You can share what you feel comfortable with, or you don't have to share at all.<sup>10</sup>

Even if you are able to manage your symptoms well, it can be helpful to have support from loved ones that you can trust. It

might be hard to ask people for support, but schizophrenia can be a lot to manage on your own.

If you are comfortable asking for help, loved ones may come with you to doctor appointments and help you remember to take your medications. They also can provide you with emotional support.<sup>11</sup>

There are also many groups where people with schizophrenia share their experiences and provide support for each other. You may consider joining a group or chatting with people online.



### Mental Health America

Connect with other patients through the Inspire program. You can talk to people online to ask questions and discuss your condition.



### NAMI Connection Recovery Support Group

Share your experience with schizophrenia and hear from other patients at weekly, biweekly, or monthly meetings



### Schizophrenia & Psychosis Action Alliance

Find in-person and virtual meetings where you can meet other people who have schizophrenia.

*Links to sites outside of NP Psych Navigator are provided as a resource to the viewer. AbbVie Inc accepts no responsibility for the content of non AbbVie linked sites.*

**Reach out to your family or friends for help if you have thoughts of harming yourself or others, or call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline for information at 800-273-8255.**

This handout is intended for your education and does not replace proper medical care. Please talk to your healthcare provider with any questions or concerns you might have.

### References

1. Schultz SH, et al. Am Fam Physician. 2007;75:1821-1829.
2. Patel KR, et al. PT. 2014;39(9):638-645.
3. American Psychiatric Association. Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition: DSM-5. 2013.
4. Hoftman GD. American Journal of Psychiatry Residents' Journal. 2017;5:7.
5. American Psychiatric Association. Available at: <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/schizophrenia/what-is-schizophrenia>
6. Horga G, et al. Nature Reviews Neuroscience. 2019;20:763-778.
7. Harvey PD, et al. Journal of Experimental Psychopathology. 2019;1:20.
8. Kane JM. J Clin Psychiatry. 2007;68 Suppl 14:27-30.
9. Lin D, et al. Front Psychiatry. 2021;12:695672.
10. Colori S. Schizophrenia Bulletin. 2019;45(2):269-270.
11. National Alliance on Mental Illness. Available at: <https://www.nami.org/Your-Journey/Family-Members-and-Caregivers/Supporting-Recovery>