

Schizophrenia



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Schizophrenia is a mental disorder marked by the loss of contact with reality. When a person's thinking, feeling, and behavior is so far from normal as to interfere with his or her ability to function in everyday life, and delusions, hallucinations, irregular thinking or emotions are produced, then he or she has a mental illness called schizophrenia.

About one hundred years ago schizophrenia was first recognized as a mental disorder and researchers have been searching for a cure since. The exact cause of schizophrenia is still unknown and scientists are certain that schizophrenia has more than one cause. Scientists have developed dozens of theories to explain what causes this disease, but researchers are focusing on four leading theories. They are the Genetic Theory, the Environmental Theory, the Biochemical Theory, and the Bio-Psycho-Social Theory.

The Genetic Theory argues that schizophrenia is caused by traits in a person's genetic makeup. As we all know, a person has twenty-three pairs of chromosomes. Each pair contains one chromosome from each parent. In corresponding locations, called loci, of each chromosome the genes for specific traits are located. Some researchers believe that problems with these genes can cause schizophrenia. We inherit our genes from our parents but this does not mean that the parents of a schizophrenic are mentally ill. Problems in a person's genetic make up could come from mutated chromosomes or recessive genes. In an attempt to prove this theory scientists study identical twins. Due to the fact that identical twins have the exact same genetic make up researchers will be able to determine if heredity is the main cause of schizophrenia. However, evidence seems to

disprove this theory. This is because on some occasions both identical twins are schizophrenics and other times only one is inflicted. To defend the theory, it should be noted that this research is difficult and complicated. Identical twins are relatively rare, especially twins who are both diagnosed with schizophrenia. Further defending the theory, studies have shown that children with one parent diagnosed with schizophrenia have a ten percent chance of suffering from schizophrenia. When both parents are schizophrenic their risk raises to about forty percent.

Very little is known about the Environmental Theory. It is built mainly on the effects stress has on human behavior, however, most researchers agree that stress alone cannot be the main cause of schizophrenia. Most researchers agree that stress can trigger or worsen the symptoms when the illness is already present. Other researchers focus on drug abuse. Like stress, certain drugs such as amphetamines can make psychotic symptoms worse if a person already has schizophrenia. Furthermore, these drugs can create schizophrenia - like symptoms in normal persons when the dosage is large. Other researchers that support the Environmental Theory believe that "slow viruses" may be to blame. Slow viruses are viral infections that go undetected for long periods of time therefore signs and symptoms are delayed and may occur many years after the first infection.

The Bio-Chemical Theory suggests that schizophrenia is caused by mixed up signals to the brain. When something acts upon one of our senses, electrical impulses are sent to the brain. These impulses allow us to feel pain, smell, and they also manage our thought processes. In our body we have a complex nerve system. For example, there is no one single nerve that travels

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from our feet to our brain. Therefore, in order for information to be sent to the brain the nerves must interact with each other. Because the system is so complex it is possible for the signal to get mixed up. When this happens our brain may misinterpret the signal or may not receive it at all. If the signal does get mixed up on the way to the brain the make up of the impulse can undergo a chemical change resulting in abnormal thought processes and abnormal behavior. For example, scientists have in-depth studies on a chemical in the brain called dopamine. They believe that schizophrenics have higher levels of this chemical than a mentally sound person. To experiment, researchers have injected animals and humans with amphetamines, this increases the amount of dopamine reaching the brain. Following the injection, the animals exhibit the same behavior as humans who have been diagnosed with schizophrenia, such as standing still for long periods of time or continuously pacing. In humans, research has shown that when given small doses of amphetamines the amount of dopamine in the brain slightly increases. Although the increase is small it still causes delusions and hallucinations. In conclusion, researchers believe that an increased amount of dopamine to the brain causes abnormal behavior, however, they cannot safely say that this is the sole cause of schizophrenia. The Bio-Psycho-Social Theory combines all of the previous theories. Some researchers believe that bio-chemical abnormalities are a contributing factor but that other events must also occur. They suggest that environmental and social problems have to be considered along with biological problems. Social scientists believe that no chemical factors are involved, instead they believe " mental disorders are described as a consequence of human motivations, drives, and unconscious forces." (Schizophrenia, Douglas W. Smith). These

scientists suggest that people become overloaded with stress, information, and stimulation. When this happens they lose their ability to cope with the anxiety which accompanies these stressors. Instead of dealing with their problems they seek peace in their own world. For example, it is common for individuals to return to "happy times" in their life such as infancy and they begin to act like a child.

Scientists have asked if there is a particular nationality that suffers more than any other. Studies have been done in Ireland and it appears that one in every twenty-five people show signs of schizophrenia, opposed to one in every hundred in the United States. E. Fuller Torrey has spent a great deal of time researching a number of schizophrenics in Ireland. Torrey has discovered that the population of schizophrenics has been rising since the 18th Century. After he made his findings public other scientists began asking questions as to why the Irish are suffering so badly. The basis of their research has focused around their diet, mainly potatoes. If potatoes are exposed to too much sunlight they produce an alkaloid called solanine. Solanine has the ability to induce gastro-intestinal problems and psychotic symptoms such as hallucinations. The idea that schizophrenia in Ireland is caused by the potato is not as far fetched as people might believe. Closer to home, a mental disease that afflicted southerners, pellagra, was caused solely from the lack of the vitamin niacin. This may lead us to believe that a mental disorder can be caused by too much exposure or lack of a certain type of food.

Another possibility, is the amount of insecticides the Irish consume from the potato. At planting time farmers use high amounts of chemicals on their potatoes to protect them from insects. When an insect ingests the chemicals

they are easily killed because the chemicals interfere with the normal functioning of the nervous system by disrupting the transmission of nerve impulses. If large doses of these chemicals have the same affect on humans as they do on insects this could answer the Irish dilemma. These toxins could be especially dangerous to women who are pregnant by damaging the fetal nerve tissue.

Despite all these theories, it is quite evident that the cause of schizophrenia is still a mystery. It also seems clear that this disease is not caused by any one factor. As of now, researchers are leaning toward the Bio-Chemical theory. The brain is the most complex organ in the human body and an imbalance of the brain's chemical system has been suspected as the main cause of schizophrenia for a long time. As previously mentioned, some researchers point to an excess of or lack of dopamine a chemical substance in the brain. Others suspect different neurotransmitters which are substances that allow communication between nerve cells. The area of the brain thought to be affected in most cases of schizophrenia is the limbic system. This is the area of the brain that acts like a gate for incoming stimuli or messages. In any case, it appears that all schizophrenics have some sort of abnormal chemicals that are not found in healthy people.

Schizophrenia is a complicated and difficult disease. It is hard to diagnose mental disorders because there are no physical indications. In the case of schizophrenia, a person can be mistaken for a shy child or person. The early signs of schizophrenia are withdrawal and being scared of society. The following table indicates common symptoms schizophrenics develop.

Reported rank order of symptoms noted in at least
50%of schizophrenic patients before hospitalization

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SymptomsPercentage (%)

tense and nervous80. 4

eating less71. 4

trouble concentrating 69. 6

trouble sleeping67. 4

enjoying things less 65. 2

restlessness63

can't remember things 632

depressions60. 9

preoccupied59. 6

seeing things less 59. 6

feeling laughed at 59. 6

loss of interest56. 5

more religious thinking54. 3

feeling bad for no reason54. 3

feeling too excited 52. 2

hearing voices and seeing things 50. 0

****Source: American Journal of Psychiatry 137: 801-807****

More severe symptoms of schizophrenia are delusions. The delusions are usually common to a type of schizophrenia called paranoid schizophrenia. People suffering from this often think they are a historic, great or famous person. These people often believe that someone is out to get them and have a great deal of suspicion. Another common symptom is hallucinations. Hallucinations cause the

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affected person to imagine hearing things or seeing things. Schizophrenics are usually detached from reality. They are not in touch with their surroundings.

Besides recognizing these symptoms, other methods of diagnosing schizophrenia is with the use of pictures and drawings. The doctor will listen to what the patient " sees" and analyze it. In doing this it is possible to determine their state of mind. Another process used in the diagnosis is Rorschach, better known as inkblots. These inkblots are used worldwide and Doctors have analyzed normal and abnormal answers. By listening to answers a doctor can determine what a common answer from a schizophrenic is. A normal persons answer would be something ordinary like a person or a mountain. A person suffering from schizophrenia would see something weird like a beast or some conflict.

In the past individuals have schizophrenia were labeled as crazy and families were embarrassed to have a mentally ill person in their family. These people would be isolated in a mental institution with bars on the windows, the building being dark and desolate. Also a common treatment for schizophrenia was insulin shock treatment. A patient would receive enough insulin to induce a seizure.

This treatment worked for very few patients. The environment that these patients lived in was more damaging to them than helpful. Mental illness was not accepted or thought of as a disease. When patients were taken to the hospitals it was common for them to be left there. Family would generally desert them because the environment was terrible, family and friends dreaded visiting.

The modern day treatment for schizophrenia has many aspects. It involves medicine, counseling, electro-convulsive therapy and hospitalization. The medications most commonly used are; anti-psychotics which are used to help calm agitation, diminish destructive behavior and hallucinations and may help correct disturbed thought processes. Secondly are anti-depressants, normally slow acting drugs but if no improvement occurs within three weeks, they may not be effective at all. Thirdly, are mood normalizers such as lithium carbonate used in manic depressive states to help stabilize mood swings which are part of the condition. Lastly, tranquilizers are used for calming agitation and anxiety. Unfortunately, along with these medications come some side effects such as inability to concentrate, and tiredness. However, there are side effect controls available.

Electro-convulsive therapy is the application of electrical currents to the brain. It is mainly used for patients suffering from extreme depressions who are suicidal and who seem unable to shake the depression under any circumstances. Unlike in the past, hospitals now have a happy environment. The family is involved with the treatment of the patient. The family themselves try to cope. They learn how things can change when the patient returns home. After the patient is released it is possible for them to go on living a normal life. A schizophrenic will most likely have to take doses of medication for the rest of their life. Side effects will be felt and unreasonable fears may still be evident but their life will be basically normal.

Researchers anticipate massive progress on the treatment for schizophrenia in the future. They believe hospitalization will be a thing of the past. Patients will be injected with medications monthly and attend group therapy with their family. The disease is detected early because of education and research. The drugs used for treatment have few side effects. Scientists hope that in the years to come treatment for schizophrenia will be non-existent. Researchers hope to pinpoint the cause and eliminate

it at birth through screening. With this treatment schizophrenia could be wiped out.

Although it may surprise some people, schizophrenia is a common disorder, striking one person in every hundred. For most people, young adulthood means leaving home, starting a job and starting a family. For most schizophrenics, young adulthood means first admission to a psychiatric hospital. An unfortunate reality for young schizophrenics is the need for hospitalization during their most vibrant and productive time. The age of the first admission is younger for men than women, early twenties for males and mid-twenties for women. The reasoning behind this variation is not exactly known but there is speculation. One biological theory that exists is the help of the female sex hormones. Scientists speculate that these hormones may help delay the horrifying symptoms that afflict schizophrenics.

Another question raised is who gets schizophrenia more commonly, men or women? Studies have shown there is no great variation in the numbers but in the severity of the symptoms. Men seem to suffer more severely. Scientists have attempted to explain this through differences in the brain.

Research has shown schizophrenia tends to affect the left side of the brain.

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Males are generally "left-brained" or "right-brained" while females have less specialization on either side of the brain. Yet another startling fact about schizophrenia is the amount of schizophrenics who are winter born. A scientific explanation for this is seasonal viruses, which may have infected the fetus but remain dormant or not as active until many years later. This fact was discovered as early as 1929 but was ignored for about forty years. By the late 1960's studies were being done in six countries using over 125, 000 people in their research. Another theory is the lack of nutrition, babies developing during the summer months do not seem to receive as much protein, thus causing abnormalities in the child. Although schizophrenia is a serious and devastating disease the outcome is not always bad. At least 25% of the treated schizophrenics recover fully to live a normal life in every aspect. Another group are not so well off and remain severely psychotic, this occurs in about 10% of the treated schizophrenics. The other 65% go through periods of psychosis and phases of recovery. An optimistic fact about the disease is people tend to "grow out of it" in their mid-life.

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