UNDERSTANDING
MENTAL ILLNESS
IN YOUR FAMILY

for young people who have a family member with

Schizophrenia

A REASON TO HOPE. THE MEANS TO COPE.
BRITISH COLUMBIA SCHIZOPHRENIA SOCIETY

BC SCHIZOPHRENIA SOCIETY FOUNDATION
SUPPORTING THE BC SCHIZOPHRENIA SOCIETY

This booklet was adapted from materials developed by Sabin Sebastion MD, Birmingham, Alabama and the South Carolina Department of Mental Health.

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"I can't understand her, my sister speaks and acts so weird, she seems to talk to herself and they say she is 'paranoid'. I have no idea what is going on with her."

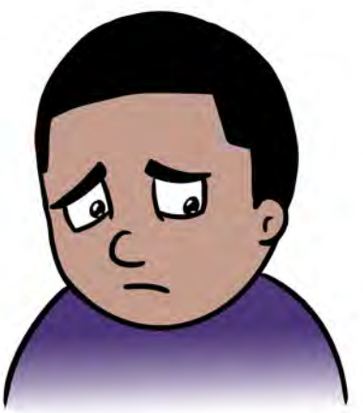
– Mark

"It's such a drag! My dad can't come and watch my games. My friends say my dad is strange. They won't come visit me because they are scared of him. Sometimes I am too, so I can't blame them, I guess."

– Denise

"When's mom gonna get well? Daddy says she's ill. Mommy can't work anymore, she is acting real different. She does not seem like my mom anymore. I am scared of her sometimes."

– Miles



So what is happening with all these family members?
They all have an illness called:

Schizophrenia

That's a pretty big word, right?

Don't worry! When you are done reading this, you will know as much, or even more, than some grown-ups about **schizophrenia**.

First, let's find out what it means to have schizophrenia.

If you know someone who has **schizophrenia**, you may already have some idea about what they are going through.

Maybe you've noticed that sometimes they do things that seem strange to you.

Maybe they've told you a bit about what it is like for them to live with **schizophrenia**.

Let's try to understand what it might feel like to have schizophrenia:

Let's say you are sitting all by yourself and you hear someone talking to you. **You look around, but there is no one there!** *The voice tells you all kinds of stuff that really annoys you.*

What would happen? **You'd be pretty angry!**
You might find yourself arguing with the voice and talking back to it.

If someone were watching you, they'd think you were pretty strange.
They probably wouldn't understand why you were acting that way.
That would be a really bad experience.

Then what would happen if you also started believing that people were out to 'get you' or 'poison your food'. **You'd be pretty suspicious.**

What if you tried to watch TV and the TV talked back to you!

What if you felt people were reading your mind?
Life would be really difficult...

What if you then lost interest in everything?
You no longer could care for your family.

What if you lost the ability to feel love or to smile or the desire to work or play? **Things are not looking too good for you, right?**

Unfortunately, this is what happens when someone has **schizophrenia**.

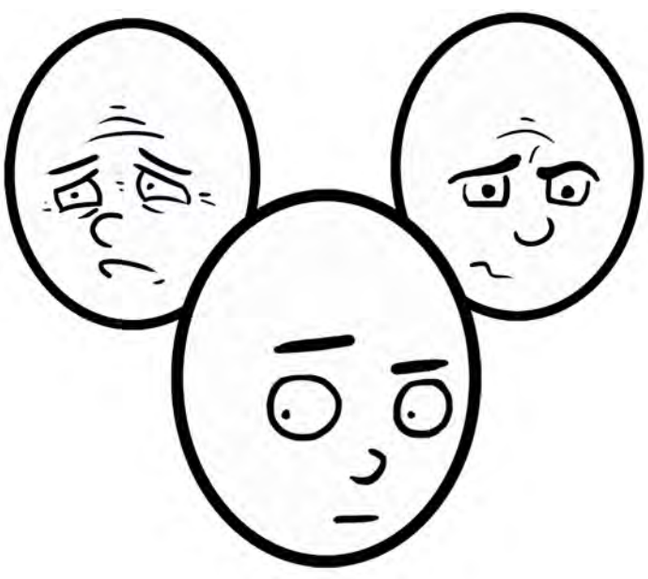
It is no fun to be ill!

Schizophrenia is an illness of the brain.

When someone has **schizophrenia**, their brain is not working right and their thinking gets mixed up.

Sometimes they might hear voices talking to them, or see things that aren't really there.

They might believe things that aren't true, like thinking someone is trying to poison their food or the TV is talking to them.



Since the messages in their brain are mixed up, their speech can get jumbled up and they might say things that don't make sense.

They can also have trouble with their memory or focusing on work or school.

They might find it really hard to do things to take care of themselves like take a shower, and they might stop doing things they used to enjoy like hobbies or spending time with family and friends.

Remember, they aren't choosing to act this way.
No one wants to be ill!

Commonly Asked Questions

*If you find yourself with lots of questions about **schizophrenia**, you're not alone.*

Here are some questions people often ask:

What causes schizophrenia?

Just like the body, the brain can get sick too, but you can't catch schizophrenia from someone else like you catch a cold.

Mental illnesses like **schizophrenia** are caused by a combination of different things. **A person's genes can make them more likely to develop schizophrenia.**

Genes are the building blocks that make us who we are and determine things like the colour of our hair or eyes.

If a person has genes that make them more likely to have schizophrenia, things that happen in their life can add to this and cause them to get schizophrenia or make the illness worse. For example, if someone goes through a difficult event like the death of a loved one or a car accident.

Using drugs and alcohol can also make someone more likely to develop schizophrenia if they already have genes that make them at risk.

Will I get schizophrenia?

Just because you have a family member with **schizophrenia**, this does not mean you will get **schizophrenia**. **If you are worried about yourself or notice any changes in your thoughts, feelings or behaviour, talk to an adult you trust.**

Commonly Asked Questions

Is it your fault? Absolutely Not!

Sometimes kids wonder if they did something to make their family member ill or if they could've done something to stop their family member from having schizophrenia.

Remember – kids are not the cause of these illnesses! Schizophrenia is no one's fault.

Will they get better?

Just like many other illnesses, there are ways to treat schizophrenia.

Medications can help people with schizophrenia feel better. They can take away the voices and the strange experiences.

Counselling or therapy can also help people with schizophrenia understand their illness and learn new ways to deal with problems.

People with schizophrenia have to take treatment for a long time, usually their whole lives. *They may become ill, get better, become ill again and then get better again.*

Schizophrenia can be hard to treat, because some medications only work for some people or only work some of the time, but doctors can help people find the right medication for them.

There are also a lot of people working hard to find a better treatment for schizophrenia. Maybe you will become a doctor and find better treatments!

Remember

Here are some important things to remember if someone in your family has a mental illness like schizophrenia...

It's not your fault

No one can cause another person to have a mental illness.

Your feelings are okay

You may have a lot of different feelings. It's okay to feel sad, lonely, angry, confused or however you feel. Other people feel the same way.

Talk to someone you trust

Share your feelings with someone you trust – a parent, grandparent, aunt or uncle, counsellor or teacher.

Take care of yourself

Find things you enjoy doing. Play a sport, read, bake, dance, make art, spend time with friends, anything you find fun that helps you relax.

It can get better

With medication and help from doctors, counsellors, family and friends, people with mental illness do get better.

It's no joke

People should never make fun of mental illness.

Knowledge is power

It can be helpful to learn more about mental illness, so you understand what is happening for your family member. Then it won't seem so scary or confusing.

Remember the Three C's

I can't **C**ause it
I can't **C**hange it
I can **C**are for myself

Where Can I Learn More?

The following resources have more information about mental illness and how to cope when someone in your family has a mental illness:

Kids & Teens in Control Groups
Support and education groups for children and youth ages 8-18 who have a family member with mental illness.
bcss.org/kidsincontrol

COPMI (Children of Parents with a Mental Illness)
Information and videos about mental illness for young people who have a parent with mental illness.
copmi.net.au/kids-young-people

BC Schizophrenia Society
Information about schizophrenia and other mental illnesses.
bcss.org

HeretoHelp
Information and resources about mental health and substance use.
heretohelp.bc.ca

Need Help?

Kids Help Phone
Call *1-800-668-6868* or Text *CONNECT* to *686868*
kidshelpphone.ca

KUU-US Crisis Line – First Nations and Indigenous specific crisis line
Call *1-800-588-8717*

YouthinBC – Online crisis chat service
youthinbc.com

Crisis Centre Suicide Line
Call *1-800-SUICIDE (1-800-784-2433)*

Things I Can Do To Help Myself

In an emergency I can call:

If I need someone to talk to I can call:

If I am looking for information I can call:

One person I can go to for help is:

Times when I may need help:

Things I can do to help myself feel better:

Notes

For more information on supporting families with mental illness, please contact:

British Columbia Schizophrenia Society
1100 – 1200 West 73rd Avenue
Vancouver, BC V6P 6G5

Phone: **604-270-7841**
Toll Free: **1-888-888-0029**
Email: **info@bcss.org**
Website: **www.bcss.org**

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