

Getting help during the early stages of schizophrenia

Editor's Note: This is the fourth in a six-part series highlighting Mental Health Awareness Month.

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 For The Telegraph

Schizophrenia is a very treatable illness when diagnosed early. A national research study - RAISE (Recovery After Initial Schizophrenia Episode) - discovered that when treated within the first three months of occurring, people did much better and were able to return to normal life vs. those who had a longer duration of untreated schizophrenia. Studies show that most people with this disorder wait approximately 2 years before seeking treatment. Many of these individuals choose to enter treatment after being released from the hospital or from the legal system. Often, they are not able to return to the same level of functioning they once enjoyed.

This illness affects sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, friends and others.

How do you know if someone you love might have a severe mental illness such as schizophrenia? The symptoms are often vague and can appear over a period of a few to several years. The age group at the highest risk are young adults between the ages of 18 and 25. Schizophrenia is rare in younger children and in adults over the age of 45.

At any given time, a little over 1 percent of the population in America will be diagnosed with schizophrenia. In New Hampshire that number translates to 13,340 people with the illness, or enough people to completely fill the SNHU Arena in Manchester and Nashua High School South combined. The first year of being diagnosed increases the suicide risk 24 times that of the rest of the population. Schizophrenia is also associated with substance use disorder at a rate of 47 percent as compared to 16 percent for the general population.

Schizophrenia can account for nearly 30 percent of all mental health care costs, yet it receives much less funding than cancer research. The World Health Organization



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(WHO) puts schizophrenia in the top 10 percent of all disabilities worldwide. People with schizophrenia are not usually violent, and yet they are twice as likely to be victims of violence. The unemployment rate is nearly 80 percent while the life expectancy is 15 to 20 years less compared to the general population. What can't be measured is the human toll of increased stress and life disruption that individuals and families experience.

Early signs

As mentioned, schizophrenia usually begins in the mid- to late-teenage years. Common signs are changes in performance in school, work or family life. Students who are involved in sports, social activities in school or other community activities may suddenly stop participating in those activities and spend more time alone in their bedroom; do or say things that seem strange or bizarre; seem more depressed or irritable; over-sleep or stay up all night; seem hostile or

suspicious; have an expressionless gaze; experience poor concentration; display inappropriate laughter or make a drastic change in friends. They may feel that someone is after them, hear voices or see things that others don't see. These changes develop slowly, so these behaviors may be misinterpreted as an increased lack of motivation, laziness or deliberately negative behavior. Again, these are emerging signs and are not easy to diagnosis as an illness. A person's willingness to accept help may be compromised by the delusions, fears and stigma associated with this illness. Often people are unsettled and uncertain as to what is happening to them. Parents find the situation extremely difficult and stressful.

Our health system provides screenings for high blood pressure, diabetes, cancer, and other illnesses but does a poor job of identifying and screening for severe mental health dis-



The purpose of the meeting was to "discuss several cases that were recently disposed of in Hillsborough County Superior Court

Madison. Several weeks into the investigation, police said, a detective was able to locate the witness who was allegedly

he "did not give anyone permission to record his private conversation ...," police said. He also "became very

allegedly selling heroin to an undercover police informant. They were also charged with endangering the wel-

charges.

Health

CONTINUED FROM | PAGE A-3

orders. People who are experiencing symptoms do not typically seek help. Often it falls on parents to get their son or daughter into treatment, yet the process is confusing and can be traumatic for all. The stigma associated with a severe mental illness such as schizophrenia prevents many from seeking help. People in the typical age group (18-25) often believe the feelings will go away and will frequently use alcohol or marijuana to treat their

symptoms, unknowingly making them worse. The words "mental illness" and "schizophrenia" have many negative connotations. In Japan, schizophrenia is now known as "Integration Disorder," resulting in a significant decrease in the stigma attached to the disorder.

The good news is that effective treatment is available. Greater Nashua Mental Health Center along with the State of New Hampshire, NAMI, and other state organizations are working together to establish evidence-based treatment of schizophrenia throughout New Hamp-

shire. Our agency has had a trained treatment team in place since 2016 and has been showing positive outcomes for the people we serve. Effective treatment is just one aspect of the program. Providing education to the community and demystifying schizophrenia is also a major part of the treatment.

We offer a wide array of behavioral health programs, including treatment for substance use disorders, and for individuals challenged with both mental health and substance misuse simultaneously. Our services are available for all ages

from children to older adults, and no one is ever turned away due to the inability to pay. In addition, we are the state-wide providers of behavioral health services for persons who are deaf or hard of hearing.

You don't need to go it alone. Let us help. Contact Greater Nashua Mental Health Center today. For an appointment call our intake line at 603-402-1574. For general information call our main number at 603-889-6147. Our video-phone number is 603-821-0073. To speak to someone 24 hours a day, seven days a week if you are in crisis, call 1-800-762-8191.



Greater Nashua Mental Health Center at Community Council

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or visit www.gnmhc.org for details.