

responsible for their getting ill, and you are not responsible for their getting better. All you can do is be understanding and supportive, accepting the fact that there will be times when you're not even up to that.

It's important to take care of yourself. Keep up the activities that you enjoy, and do things that make you feel good. Eat well, exercise to reduce your stress levels and get enough sleep. Find things that you like to do, and do them regularly. Get involved in activities outside your home.

Be honest about how your sibling's illness makes you feel. It's natural to be hesitant to talk to others about what is happening in your family, but don't keep everything bottled up inside. Find someone that you can talk to, like a trusted friend, a guidance counsellor or a youth group leader. You may also find it helpful to talk to a social worker or a therapist.

How to help your brother or sister

Your brother or sister is facing a huge challenge, but one that can be overcome with treatment, support and time. You can play a part in the recovery process, but at the same time you need to find the right balance between being helpful and allowing your sibling to make their own way.

Continue to be there for them. Support them and listen to them, even though you might find it hard to understand them. Invite your sibling to do activities that they used to enjoy,

but don't be hurt if they say no. It just means that they aren't up to it.

Psychotic disorders are up and down, so sometimes your sibling will be better than at other times. Try not to take it personally when they do or say things that are hurtful. Don't try to argue with their delusions—it won't change their mind. As much as possible, try to keep things calm—stress and upset will only make things worse.

You need to be patient as your brother or sister deals with their illness. Schizophrenia is not something that people get over quickly—it can take months or years. Try to remain positive.

Where to go for help

Here are some websites and books that provide information on schizophrenia and supports for parents and siblings:

- www.ssoaware.com
- www.psychosissucks.ca
- www.normalone.com
- www.thearc.org/siblingsupport
- www.rethink.org
- www.nostigma.org
- www.reachout.com.au
- *When Madness Comes Home: Help and Hope for the Children, Siblings and Partners of the Mentally Ill*, by Victoria Secunda
- *The Normal One: Life with a Difficult or Damaged Sibling*, by Jeanne Safer
- *Mad House: Growing Up in the Shadow of Mentally Ill Siblings*, by Clea Simon

Contact the Schizophrenia Society of Ontario

We are here to help. The Schizophrenia Society of Ontario (SSO) is a family-based organization that understands what it's like to live with schizophrenia. Our objectives are to:

- support, educate, engage, and empower families
- promote community awareness
- advocate on behalf of families affected by schizophrenia
- work cooperatively with organizations for allied disorders
- support and advocate for relevant research, and
- promote early intervention

For further information, please contact us at:

Schizophrenia Society of Ontario

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Toronto, ON M5V 2L4

Phone: 416-449-6830 or 1-800-449-6367

Fax: 416-449-8434

E-mail: sso@schizophrenia.on.ca

Website: www.schizophrenia.on.ca

This information should not be used as a substitute for the advice of a professional. Consult a physician or a lawyer to discuss your individual facts and circumstances.

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A REASON TO HOPE. THE MEANS TO COPE.
THE SCHIZOPHRENIA SOCIETY OF ONTARIO
SOCIÉTÉ ONTARIENNE DE LA SCHIZOPHRÉNIE
UNE SOURCE D'ESPOIR, DE SOUTIEN ET D'ENTRAÏDE.

When your brother or sister has schizophrenia



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When your brother or sister has schizophrenia, it can turn your whole life upside down. You may be confused about what is happening and wonder what can be done to make things better.

Schizophrenia is hard to talk about, but it's important to learn about the illness, so you can better understand your brother or sister—and keep your own life on track. The first thing you need to do is get the facts.

What is schizophrenia?

Our brain controls the way we think and how we behave. Like any other part of the body, it can become diseased or damaged. Schizophrenia is a disorder of the brain which affects a person's thought processes, making them unable to tell the difference between what is real and what is not. When they lose this sense of reality, they no longer see and respond normally to the world around them.

Think of it this way. Many of us go through times when we feel sad, anxious or irritable, but these problems eventually go away. However for some people, these feelings become very intense, last for a long period of time and begin to interfere with their ability to live a normal life. When that happens, they may be in the early stages of schizophrenia.

Here are some things a person goes through when they are developing schizophrenia:

- feeling depressed or anxious
- having difficulty thinking and concentrating
- showing little or no emotion
- losing interest in their schoolwork and friends
- sleeping during the day and staying up at night

- lacking energy and motivation
- feeling that their friends, family and society are against them
- believing that people are following them or trying to hurt them (paranoia)
- hearing, seeing or tasting things that aren't real (hallucinations)
- having very strong and bizarre beliefs (delusions)

These symptoms are frightening for you to see, and frightening for your brother or sister to experience. It's important to remember that they are ill, and that schizophrenia isn't something they can just 'snap out of' if they want to. It's a serious illness that has a huge impact on how they function.

What causes schizophrenia?

We don't know yet why certain people develop schizophrenia. Researchers are looking at the role that genetics, environmental factors and viruses may play. New technologies are helping doctors and researchers understand more about what causes psychotic disorders like schizophrenia, and how to treat them. One thing is certain—you and your family didn't do anything to cause it.

It's natural for you to be worried about the possibility of developing schizophrenia yourself. Because you have a sibling who is ill, it does increase the chance that you could develop the illness—but only slightly. If you are concerned, make an appointment with your family physician to discuss your situation.

How is schizophrenia treated?

Although there is no cure for schizophrenia, it is a medical illness that can be treated.

Treatment begins with medication, which helps control the symptoms. After that, it is important for the person to get counseling or psychotherapy to help them understand their illness and deal with its impact on their life. They also need rehabilitation programs to help them gain skills they may have lost because of the illness and to rebuild their confidence. This can include job training, educational programs, social skills development and recreational programs.

It's also important to remember that your brother or sister is still a person who needs the same things that we all do, like a safe place to live, activities that make them feel good about themselves, and family and friends who love and support them.

How does your sibling's illness affect you?

Your sibling's illness can affect you in many ways. It can leave you feeling a range of emotions, such as anger, fear, guilt and resentment for how their illness has affected your life.

Their behaviour may be hard to understand and frightening at times, because you never know how they are going to react. It can make you feel ashamed to bring friends to your house and unsure about how to explain the illness to others. You may feel very sad that your brother or sister isn't the person they used to be, and that your family isn't what it used to be either.

You are probably worried a lot—about how your parents are coping and whether your sibling will ever get better. You may feel afraid that your brother or sister might hurt themselves or someone in your family if they get angry or upset.

You may feel guilty that you have a better life than your sibling and that you can't talk about the good things you accomplish. Or, you might feel that you have to excel in everything to make up for your ill sibling. Sometimes it can seem that your problems and issues don't matter to your parents. Remember that your parents care; it's just that an illness like schizophrenia demands a lot of their time and energy.

If you're older, you may feel real sadness about not having had a 'normal' family life. You may grieve the fact that your brother or sister isn't well enough to celebrate with you on special occasions, like your graduation or wedding. You may be concerned about the possibility that your own children could develop schizophrenia, or that one day you will be responsible for taking care of your ill sibling.

All these reactions are very normal. You shouldn't feel badly for having them.

How to help yourself

The first thing you need to do is educate yourself about schizophrenia. That will help you to separate the person from the illness and be more understanding towards your sibling.

Despite your best efforts, your sibling's symptoms may get worse. You were not