

# Schizophrenia:

## Identifying and addressing relapse signs

The return of symptoms after a significant period of stabilization is referred to as relapse. Because schizophrenia is a chronic illness, relapse is not uncommon and may occur in spite of treatment adherence.<sup>1</sup> For each individual with schizophrenia, there are warning signs that if identified and addressed early, may not progress to relapse.

**Between 80–90% of individuals being treated for schizophrenia will experience a relapse.<sup>2</sup>**

### Identifying early warning signs of relapse

If symptoms of schizophrenia become more intense or serious than what is usual for you when you are stable (referred to as baseline status), then they are considered warning signs. The types and degrees of warning signs vary among individuals. Common warning signs of relapse include but are not limited to:<sup>3</sup>

#### Thoughts

- Confused thoughts that prevent you from solving problems and making decisions.
- Repeated thoughts that you cannot get out of your head.
- Thinking others are talking about you.
- Thinking that your thoughts are being controlled.
- Thinking that you have special powers.
- Thinking that others are against you.
- Thinking you can read others' minds or others' can read your mind.

#### Perceptions

- Strong, sharp sensations (seeing, hearing, smelling, touching).
- Seeing things others do not see.
- Hearing voices others do not hear.

#### Feelings

- Feeling depressed, low, or blue.
- Feeling unable to cope with day to day stress.
- Feeling afraid of going crazy.
- Feeling anxious, restless, or stirred up.
- Feeling increasingly religious.
- Feeling like you are being punished.

#### Behaviors

- Sleeping too much or too little.
- Spending a lot of time alone.
- Speaking with jumbled words.
- Neglecting hygiene needs (bathing, brushing teeth, washing hair).
- Avoiding routine tasks (making bed, preparing meals, going to work/school).

- Moving with sped up or slowed down motions.
- Drinking alcohol (or more than usual).
- Smoking cigarettes (or more than usual).
- Behaving out of control (e.g., arguing loudly, kicking furniture).

## How to address early warning signs

**Step 1.** Believe that you have some control over your warning signs.

**Step 2.** Identify your specific relapse warning signs. Warning signs vary among individuals with schizophrenia. It is important to become familiar with your warning sign profile so that you can promptly identify and address warning signs.

**Step 3.** Identify triggers to your warning signs. There may be events that result in worsening symptoms. These events are referred to as triggers. Examples of triggers are:

1. Stressful events, such as family arguments, loss of loved one, or a move to a new home.
2. Stopping medication or other prescribed treatment.

**Step 4.** Determine actions that can be taken to stop warning signs before they turn into serious symptoms. Some actions that can be taken include:

1. Relax in a place where stimulation (light, sound) is minimized.
2. Pace yourself. If any tasks can be postponed, postpone them.
3. Take medications as prescribed. If you are having problems taking medication as prescribed, talk to your doctor.

4. Find a support group. A support group is a group of people with similar challenges who provide encouragement and advice to others based on their personal experiences. You can find a support group in your area by contacting the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI); phone: 1-800-950-6264; website: [www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org), look for *Find Your Local NAMI*.
5. Ask your doctor about psychotherapy. If you do not participate in psychotherapy, discuss this option with your physician. Psychotherapy may help you better understand your illness, solve problems, improve relationships with family, friends, and coworkers, and cope better with day-to-day stress.
6. Take care of your physical health. When your physical health is optimal, then you may be able to cope better with emotional problems. If you do not have a primary care physician, it may be useful to obtain one.
7. If you use alcohol/drugs or behave in dangerous ways (hitting, driving recklessly) when you feel stressed, find something interesting to do (reading, going to the movies) while you wait for the urges to pass.

1. American Psychiatric Association. *Practice Guideline for the Treatment of Patients with Schizophrenia*. February, 2004. [http://www.psychiatryonline.com/pracGuide/pracGuideTopic\\_6.aspx](http://www.psychiatryonline.com/pracGuide/pracGuideTopic_6.aspx)
2. Treatment Advocacy Center [www.treatmentadvocacycenter.org](http://www.treatmentadvocacycenter.org)
3. Birchwood, M, Spencer, E, McGovern, D. *Schizophrenia: early warning signs*. *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment*. Volume 6. 2000. <http://apt.rcpsych.org/cgi/content/full/6/2/93>.

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