

# Schizophrenia and Addiction Examined

By Jim Rachels



Schizophrenia is defined as a long-term mental disorder involving a breakdown in the relation between thought, emotion, and behavior. This leads to a faulty perception, inappropriate actions and feelings, withdrawal from reality and personal relationships into fantasy and delusion, and a sense of mental fragmentation.

Research has found that a high number of people with schizophrenia also struggle with addiction. They are often unable to separate the imaginary from reality. People with schizophrenia may have difficulty responding to social situations in an emotionally suitable manner. This usually results in issues with interpersonal relationships or in other important areas of their lives, such as school or work.

Schizophrenia is occasionally confused with Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD). The overwhelming majority of people suffering from schizophrenia do not have MPD and are not violent. Violence is more common in people with MPD.

Researchers believe that schizophrenia is linked to the following:

1.) Genetics:

Schizophrenia runs in families. It occurs in 10% of people with a sibling or parent who has this disease. Researchers believe certain genes inherited from one's parents may increase the risk of becoming schizophrenic. Scientists have also found that people with schizophrenia often have a disruption in brain development.

2.) Brain Structure and Chemistry: Imbalances of certain chemicals in the brain, such as glutamate, serotonin, and dopamine, are connected to schizophrenia. These imbalances affect the way the brain reacts to stimuli and can lead to hypersensitivity and hallucinations, which are common symptoms of schizophrenia. Scientists found slight differences in the brain structure of those with schizophrenia. The difference includes decreased gray brain matter, larger ventricles (cavities in the brains center, filled with fluid) and an increase or decrease in brain activity.

3.) Environmental Factors:

Some researchers believe that a person's environment, combined with genetics, may play a role in the development of schizophrenia. Environmental factors may include health related problems

occurring during birth, such as exposure to bacteria, viruses, or malnutrition.

## Schizophrenia + Addiction

Schizophrenia and addiction can occasionally co-occur. An estimated 50% of people who suffer from schizophrenia, also struggle with substance abuse. Schizophrenics often engage in substances as a way to self-medicate or relieve emotions and feelings associated with depression and anxiety.

Substance abuse can often act as an environmental trigger, although it cannot cure schizophrenia. Someone with genetic risk factors for the illness, may develop schizophrenia after extended use of substances. Using drugs such as marijuana, coke, and amphetamines, can also worsen schizophrenia symptoms and worsen their severity. Schizophrenia is often mistaken for substance abuse because the illnesses have similar symptoms. Because of this, diagnosis of schizophrenia can sometimes be difficult. However, scientists continue to study the disorders independently and concurrently to improve the accuracy of dual diagnosis.

Schizophrenia is also characterized by a wide range of symptoms that make it difficult for the affected person to function normally. Symptoms can vary and may be cognitive, behavioral, or emotional in nature.

Symptoms of schizophrenia can include delusional thinking. People with Schizophrenia may have beliefs that are not based in reality. These delusions can include almost anything and are usually based on misinterpreted sensory experiences.

Delusions may include:

- feeling harassed or threatened by another person, real or imaginary
- believing one has mystic powers or incredible luck
- the feeling of impending doom
- thinking they are someone else, like a historical person or a celebrity

It can be extremely difficult to convince someone with schizophrenia that these delusions are false.

Hallucinations are when a person hears, sees, smells or feels something that does not exist. Someone struggling with schizophrenia might be engrossed or engaged in an experience that has no actual basis in reality. Hearing voices is one of the most common hallucinations among those with schizophrenia.

**Disorganized motor or catatonic behaviors:** Individuals suffering with schizophrenia might show disorganized, almost childlike motor behavior. This behavior can include movements in excess, strange postures and a lack of impulse control. This person may also go in and out of a catatonic state, in which they will not speak, move, or respond to communication.

**Negative symptoms:** negative symptoms of a schizophrenic are the absence of normal behaviors or function. These symptoms often present years before a person has their first schizophrenic episode, when psychotic symptoms, like hallucinations and delusions, set in. Negative symptoms are often mistaken for other mental disorders, such as depression and anxiety. Common negative symptoms of schizophrenia can include:

- lack of interest or motivation
- diminished emotional expressions
- changes in sleep patterns
- becoming socially withdrawn
- not caring about appearance or hygiene

**Treatment for schizophrenia and addiction:**

When treated independently, treatment for schizophrenia and addiction, typically involves a combination of medications and psychotherapy, rehabilitation education and self-help groups. Dual diagnosis programs work by treating both schizophrenia and drug/alcohol addiction together instead of two separate conditions.

Generally, detox (which is the process of removing drugs from a user's system) is the first step in dual diagnosis treatment. Once the user's body is free of all substances, a professional treatment team can better assess the patient's schizophrenia symptoms and determine the next step of treatment. Antipsychotic medicines are usually prescribed to help alleviate symptoms of schizophrenia. Sometimes

several prescriptions may be tested before finding the right medication to treat a patient's specific chemical imbalance. When taking medications to manage their symptoms, dual diagnosis patients also attend various therapies to address the underlying causes of their disorders. One of the most common forms of therapy used in dual diagnosis is family therapy. Many people who suffer from schizophrenia, are part of families with high stress levels. Family therapy can help reduce the amount and severity of stress, which can act as a trigger for both schizophrenia and substance abuse.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is another common type of therapy used to treat co-occurring schizophrenia and addiction. CBT helps the patient identify specific behaviors or ways of thinking that contribute to their addiction as well as their schizophrenia. It can also help patients learn to manage symptoms of schizophrenia, such as auditory hallucinations, that may persist even when taking antipsychotic medication.

Recovery from schizophrenia and addiction is possible.