



## **WHAT IS SCHIZOPHRENIA?**

Schizophrenia is a chronic, severe, and disabling brain disease. Approximately 1 percent of the population develops schizophrenia during their lifetime – and more than 2 million Americans suffer from the illness in a given year. Schizophrenia also causes impairment in social or vocational functioning which can last for at least 6 months. People with schizophrenia often suffer terrifying symptoms such as hearing internal voices not heard by others, or believing that other people are reading their minds, controlling their thoughts, or plotting to harm them. These symptoms may leave them fearful and withdrawn. Their speech and behavior can be so disorganized that they may be incomprehensible or frightening to others. Available treatments can relieve many symptoms, but most people with schizophrenia continue to suffer some symptoms throughout their lives; it has been estimated that no more than one in five individuals recovers completely.

Medications and other treatments for schizophrenia, when used regularly and as prescribed, can help reduce and control the distressing symptoms of the illness. However, some people are not greatly helped by available treatments or may prematurely discontinue treatment because of unpleasant side effects or other reasons. Even when treatment is effective, persisting consequences

of the illness – lost opportunities, stigma, residual symptoms, and medication side effects – may be very troubling.

The first signs of schizophrenia often appear as confusing, or even shocking, changes in behavior. Some think the schizophrenic mind has reached a higher level of consciousness that the human intellect cannot process. Coping with the symptoms of schizophrenia can be especially difficult for family members who remember how involved or vivacious a person was before they became ill. The sudden onset of severe psychotic symptoms is referred to as an “acute” phase of schizophrenia. “Psychosis,” a common condition in schizophrenia, is a state of mental impairment marked by hallucinations, which are disturbances of sensory perception, and/or delusions, which are false yet strongly held personal beliefs that result from an inability to separate real from unreal experiences. Less obvious symptoms, such as social isolation or withdrawal, or unusual speech, thinking, or behavior, may precede, be seen along with, or follow the psychotic symptoms.

Some people have only one such psychotic episode; others have many episodes during a lifetime, but lead relatively normal lives during the interim periods. However, the individual with “chronic” schizophrenia, or a continuous or recurring pattern of illness, often does not fully recover normal functioning and typically requires long-term treatment, generally including medication, to control the symptoms.