

Helping Someone with Schizophrenia

Overcoming Challenges While Taking Care of Yourself



The love and support of family and friends plays an important role in schizophrenia treatment. If someone close to you has schizophrenia, you can make a huge difference by helping that person find the right treatment and self-help, cope with symptoms, and build a fulfilling life. A diagnosis of schizophrenia is not a life-sentence for your loved one. Recovery is possible, especially with your support. While dealing with a loved one's schizophrenia can be challenging, these strategies can help you guide your loved one on the road to recovery without losing sight of your own hopes and dreams.

My loved one has schizophrenia, how do I help?

If you have a loved one with schizophrenia, you may be struggling with any number of difficult emotions, including fear, guilt, anger, and frustration. You may feel helpless in the face of your loved one's symptoms, be worried about the stigma of schizophrenia, or confused and embarrassed by strange behaviors. You may even be tempted to hide your loved one's illness from others.

To help someone with schizophrenia, it's important to:

- ▶ Accept the illness and its difficulties
- ▶ Not buy into the myth that someone with schizophrenia can't get better or live a full and meaningful life
- ▶ Do your best to help your loved one feel better and enjoy life

- ▶ Pay attention to your own needs
- ▶ Maintain your sense of humor and remain hopeful

Tips for helping a loved one with schizophrenia

- **Educate yourself.** Learning about [schizophrenia and its treatment](/articles/mental-disorders/schizophrenia-treatment-and-self-help.htm) (/articles/mental-disorders/schizophrenia-treatment-and-self-help.htm) will allow you to make informed decisions about how best to cope with symptoms, encourage your loved one to pursue self-help strategies, handle setbacks, and work towards recovery.
- **Reduce stress.** Stress can cause schizophrenia symptoms to flare up, so it's important to create a structured and supportive environment for your loved one.
- **Set realistic expectations.** It's important to be realistic about the challenges of schizophrenia. Help your loved one set and achieve manageable goals, and be patient with the pace of recovery.
- **Empower your loved one.** Be careful that you're not taking over and doing things for your loved one that he or she is capable of doing. Support your loved one while still encouraging as much independence and self-help as possible.

Tip 1: Take care of yourself

Taking care of yourself isn't being selfish. In fact, it's just as important for your loved one with schizophrenia that you look after your own health needs. Schizophrenia can place an incredible amount of stress on the family. It can take over your life and burn you out. And if you're stressed, you'll make the person with schizophrenia stressed and trigger or exacerbate their symptoms.

Since adopting healthy lifestyle habits is also important for your loved one in managing schizophrenia symptoms, by taking care of your own health you can act as a role model for your loved one. You may even be able to pursue some of these steps together, helping to motivate and encourage each other.

Connect with others. Social interaction with someone who cares about you is the most effective way to relieve stress. It's important for both you and the person with schizophrenia to have other people you can connect with face-to-face—someone you can

talk to for an uninterrupted period of time, someone who will listen without judging or continually being distracted. That person may be a friend, family member, clergy member, or professional therapist.

Get regular exercise. Physical activity reduces stress and releases endorphins, powerful chemicals in your brain that energize your spirits and make you feel good. Whether you exercise alone, with a friend, or with your loved one with schizophrenia, aim for 30 minutes of activity on most days, or if it's easier, three 10-minute sessions.

Eat a healthy diet. What you eat has a direct impact on the way you feel. Minimize sugar and refined carbs, foods that quickly lead to a crash in mood and energy. [Boost your intake of Omega-3 fatty acids](/articles/healthy-eating/choosing-healthy-fats.htm) (/articles/healthy-eating/choosing-healthy-fats.htm) from fatty fish, fish oil, walnuts, and flaxseeds to help improve your focus, energy, and outlook. The same diet tips can help manage your loved one's symptoms, too.

Practice acceptance. Instead of dwelling on the unfairness of your loved one's diagnosis, accept your feelings, even the negative ones. It can make a huge difference in your ability to manage stress and balance your moods. See HelpGuide's [Emotional Intelligence Toolkit](/articles/mental-health/emotional-intelligence-toolkit.htm) (/articles/mental-health/emotional-intelligence-toolkit.htm) for more.

Seek out joy. Making time for fun isn't indulgent—it's necessary. Schedule time into your day for things you enjoy, whether it's spending time in nature, visiting friends, or reading a good book. Encourage your loved one with schizophrenia to do the same.

Look after your health. Neglecting your health will only add to the stress in your life. [Get enough sleep](/articles/sleep/getting-better-sleep.htm) (/articles/sleep/getting-better-sleep.htm) and stay on top of any medical conditions.



(/articles/stress/relaxation-techniques-for-stress-relief.htm)

[Relaxation Techniques](/articles/stress/relaxation-techniques-for-stress-relief.htm): (/articles/stress/relaxation-techniques-for-stress-relief.htm) Accessing the Relaxation Response

Use relaxation techniques. Techniques such as meditation, deep breathing, yoga, or progressive muscle relaxation can [put the brakes on stress](/articles/stress/relaxation-techniques-for-stress-relief.htm) (/articles/stress/relaxation-techniques-for-stress-relief.htm) and bring your mind and body back into balance.

Tip 2: Build your support network

To better support and care for someone with schizophrenia, you need to find help, encouragement, and understanding from others. The more support you have, the better it will be for both you and your loved one.

Recognize your own limits. Be realistic about the level of support and care you can provide. You can't do it all, and you won't be much help to a loved one if you're exhausted so seek help where you can.

Join a support group. Meeting others who know first-hand what you're going through can help reduce feelings of isolation and fear. Support groups provide an invaluable venue for the relatives of people with schizophrenia to share experiences, advice, and information.

Turn to trusted friends and family members. Ask loved ones if you can call on them for support. Most people will be flattered by your request.

Seek out new friends. If you don't feel that you have anyone to turn to, it's never too late to [build new friendships](/articles/relationships-communication/making-good-friends.htm) (/articles/relationships-communication/making-good-friends.htm) and improve your support network.

Take advantage of support services. Ask your loved one's doctor or therapist about respite services and other support available in your area, or contact local hospitals and mental health clinics.

Tip 3: Encourage treatment and self-help

Encouraging treatment and self-help is a cornerstone of helping a loved one with schizophrenia. While medication is an important element of schizophrenia treatment, your loved one's recovery depends on other factors as well. [Self-help strategies](/articles/mental-disorders/schizophrenia-treatment-and-self-help.htm) (/articles/mental-disorders/schizophrenia-treatment-and-self-help.htm) such as changing to a healthy diet, managing stress, exercising, and seeking social support can have a profound effect on your loved one's symptoms, feelings, and self-esteem. And the more someone does for themselves, the less hopeless and helpless they'll feel, and the more likely their doctor will be able to reduce their medication. Your encouragement and support can be crucial to your loved one starting and continuing a program of self-help.

Starting treatment

Often, the first challenge of treatment is convincing the person with schizophrenia to see a doctor. To people experiencing delusions, hallucinations, and paranoia, there is no need for medical intervention because the voices and conspiracy theories are real.

If a loved one with schizophrenia is reluctant to see a doctor, try to:

Provide options. Your loved one may be more willing to see a doctor if he or she can control the situation somewhat. If your relative appears suspicious of you, suggest another person accompany them to the appointment. You can also give your loved one a choice of doctors.



(/articles/mental-disorders/schizophrenia-treatment-and-self-help.htm)

[Schizophrenia Treatment and Self-Help: \(/articles/mental-disorders/schizophrenia-treatment-and-self-help.htm\)](/articles/mental-disorders/schizophrenia-treatment-and-self-help.htm) Getting All the Help You Need

Focus on a particular symptom. Someone with schizophrenia may resist seeing a doctor out of fear of being judged or labeled “crazy.” You can make the doctor less threatening by suggesting a visit in order to deal with a specific symptom such as insomnia or lack of energy.

Tips for supporting a loved one’s schizophrenia treatment

- **Seek help right away.** Early intervention makes a difference in the course of schizophrenia, so help your loved one find a good doctor and start treatment.
- **Promote independence.** Rather than doing everything for your loved one, help them develop or relearn skills that will allow for greater independence.
- **Be collaborative.** When your loved one has a voice in their own treatment, they will be more motivated to work towards recovery.

- **Encourage self-help.** Since schizophrenia is often episodic, periods of remission from the severest symptoms can provide an opportunity for your loved one to employ self-help strategies that may limit the length and frequency of future episodes.

Tip 4: Monitor medication

Once in treatment, careful monitoring can ensure that your loved one stays on track and gets the most out of medication.

Take side effects seriously. Many people with schizophrenia stop taking their medication because of side effects. Bring any distressing side effects to the attention of the doctor, who may be able to reduce the dose, switch to another antipsychotic, or add medication to counter the side effect.

Encourage your loved one to take medication regularly. Even with side effects under control, some people with schizophrenia refuse medication or have trouble remembering their daily dose. Medication calendars, weekly pillboxes, and timers can help. Some medications are available as long-lasting weekly or monthly injections instead of daily pills.

Be careful to avoid drug interactions. Help your loved one avoid any dangerous drug interactions by giving the doctor a complete list of the drugs and supplements they're taking. Mixing alcohol or illegal drugs with schizophrenia medication is harmful, so talk to the doctor if your relative has a substance abuse problem.

Track your family member's progress. A journal or diary is a good way to track changes in your family member's behavior, mood, and other symptoms in response to medication.

Tip 5: Watch for signs of relapse

Stopping medication is the most frequent cause of relapse in schizophrenia, so it's extremely important that your family member continues to take all medication as directed. While relapse can occur even if a person is taking medication as prescribed, you may be able to prevent a full-blown crisis by recognizing the warning signs and taking immediate steps.

Common warning signs of schizophrenia relapse

- Insomnia
- Social withdrawal

- Deterioration of personal hygiene
- Increasing paranoia

- Hostility
- Confusing or nonsensical speech
- Strange disappearances
- Hallucinations

If you notice any warning signs of relapse or other indications that your family member's symptoms of schizophrenia are getting worse, **call the doctor right away.**

Tip 6: Prepare for crisis situations

Despite your best efforts to prevent relapse, there may be times when your loved one's condition deteriorates rapidly and hospitalization is required to keep him or her safe. Having an emergency plan ready for an acute psychotic episode will help you handle the crisis safely and quickly. A good emergency plan for someone with schizophrenia includes:

- ▶ Emergency contact information for your loved one's doctor and therapists.
- ▶ The address and phone number of the hospital you will go to for psychiatric admission.
- ▶ Friends or relatives who will take care of other children or dependents while you deal with the crisis.

It's also wise to go over the emergency plan with your family member. The crisis situation may be less frightening to your loved one if they know what to expect during an emergency.

10 tips for handling a schizophrenia crisis

1. Remember that you cannot reason with acute psychosis
2. The person may be terrified by his/her own feelings of loss of control
3. Do not express irritation or anger
4. Do not shout
5. Do not use sarcasm as a weapon

6. Decrease distractions (turn off the TV, radio, fluorescent lights that hum, etc.)
7. Ask any casual visitors to leave—the fewer people the better
8. Avoid direct continuous eye contact
9. Avoid touching the person
10. Sit down and ask the person to sit down also

Source: *World Fellowship for Schizophrenia and Allied Disorders*

Tip 7: Explore housing options

Someone with schizophrenia needs a stable, supportive place to live, but finding the right living situation can be challenging.

- ▶ Can your loved one care for him or herself?
- ▶ How much support does he or she need with daily activities?
- ▶ Does your loved one have a drug or alcohol problem?
- ▶ How much treatment supervision does your loved one require?

Living with family

Living with family can be a good option for someone with schizophrenia if their family members understand the illness well, have a strong support system of their own, and are able to provide whatever assistance is needed.

At-home arrangements are less likely to be successful if the person with schizophrenia uses drugs or alcohol, resists taking medication, or is aggressive or uncooperative.

Choosing the Right Housing Option for Someone with Schizophrenia

Living with family works best if:

Adapted from: *Schizophrenia: A Handbook for Families, Health Canada*

Choosing the Right Housing Option for Someone with Schizophrenia

- The person with schizophrenia functions at a fairly high level, has friendships, and is involved in activities outside the home.
- The interaction among family members is relaxed.
- The person with schizophrenia intends to take advantage of available support services.
- The living situation does not negatively impact the lives of any young children in the home.

Living with family is not advised if:

- The main support person is single, ill, or elderly.
- The person with schizophrenia is so ill that there is little chance of leading a normal family life.
- The situation causes stress in the marriage or leaves children in the home feeling frightened and resentful.
- Most family events revolve around the person with schizophrenia.
- Support services are unavailable.

Adapted from: *Schizophrenia: A Handbook for Families, Health Canada*

Try not to feel guilty if you are unequipped to house someone with schizophrenia. If you can't look after your own needs or those of other family members while caring for your loved one, they will be better off elsewhere.

Residential options outside the family home

If an at-home living arrangement isn't the right fit, explore the residential facilities in your community.

Options in your area may include:

Residential treatment facilities or 24-hour care homes – A more structured living environment for those requiring greater assistance or suffering an acute psychotic episode.

Transitional group home – An intensive program that helps individuals transition back into society and avoid relapse after a crisis or hospitalization.

Foster or boarding homes – A group living situation offering a degree of independence, while providing meals and other basic necessities.

Supervised apartments – Residents live alone or share an apartment, with staff members available on-site to provide assistance and support.

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