

Schizophrenia:
Will I Ever Understand Enough?
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Abstract

This paper seeks to provide a brief summary of schizophrenia and my life. It will introduce to you someone that was a strong support for me but now suffers from this horrible disease. It will take you step by step through my search for answers about schizophrenia and how loved ones cope. And last this paper will show you the things that I have learned and failed to learn through this search.

Introduction

One year we could not have a Christmas tree. Around that same time, my mom duct taped a voice recorder under our dining room table, took apart our TV, and dismantled the doorbell. She thought people were after her and she was sure they had been in the house and planted bugs.

What I Already Know

I know my mom suffers from disorganized paranoid schizophrenia. She was diagnosed in 1992, and it was that year when she started saying my stepdad was out to get her and that he was the antichrist. The summer after she was diagnosed, she took one of our scary movies and destroyed it because she thought it was evil.

On a very cold winter night my mom drove out by Dunkerton, stopped her car in the middle of the highway (with lights left on and door wide open), and got out to approach passing cars. She didn't have a coat on and only a thin pair of shoes. Luckily, one of the people that she stopped called the police. She was then taken to Covenant Psychiatric Unit where she had been many times before. When I arrived at the hospital the next day, they told me my mom was in an observation room. She wouldn't keep her clothes on and was saying things that were upsetting to the other patients. Upon entering the locked observation room, I observed my mom sitting on the bed with nothing on. Her clothes were in a pile in the corner and soiled with urine and feces. The room smelled horrible. There were feces and urine on her and the bed. I was furious. I then began the task of cleaning her up and trying to get the situation under control.

My mom has tried to commit suicide several times. She does not watch television because she thinks that the people in it are watching her. She tells me quite often that someone has been in her house and put something in her milk or broke her things. Although there has been some improvement with symptoms over the years, there is one that is a constant: my mom thinks she smells gas and carbon monoxide. No matter where she is, she smells it. Every time she finds out that one of us is sick, she asks if we have had the furnace checked or if we have changed the filters. She also wants to know if anyone else in the house is sick. She has had the gas company threaten to turn off her gas if she doesn't stop calling them out to check for leaks.

This is just a brief description of some of the symptoms of schizophrenia. I know that this disease will be in our lives forever. There is no cure. I know I will never have the mom that I grew up with back again.

Why I Want to Know More

I have a difficult time with this part of my life. I want to know why my mom had this happen to her. I want to know what she goes through. I think that if I understood it more, it would help me have patience with her. I want to learn what coping skills are available. I need to know if this is hereditary because I worry everyday about ending up like her. I hope one day to be able to spend more time with the person who once was an important part of my life.

The Story of My Search

Before I could begin my search for answers, I had to search within myself. I had to ask myself if I am ready to face what I was about to learn. I have been hiding behind a wall for 18 years. With a lot of thought and plenty of soul searching I have realized that I have to do this.

I need to know the answers to my questions. It's time to learn about this horrible thing that has taken my mother from me.

I began by calling Covenant Clinic Psychiatry. I was put in touch with the clinic director, Judy Lentzkow. I explained the reason for my call and asked if she could arrange for me to interview one of the psychiatrists there. After asking many questions about the interview, she declined because their schedule would not permit it. I have to say that I became very discouraged and a little angry. I finally had the courage to seek out the answers that I have wanted to know for several years and I was shot down. After adjusting my attitude and trying to understand it from her point, I began my search again.

I then called Black Hawk Grundy Mental Health and asked to speak with the executive director, Thomas Eachus. He was willing to meet with me and answer any questions I might have. Yes! I was back on track.

Walking into to interview I was very nervous, not about the interview itself but with what I was about to find out. Once we got to talking and I started asking questions I felt much more at ease. I focused more on the task at hand. We discussed everything from how a person gets this disease to how a person lives the rest of their lives productively with it. He answered questions about treatments, symptoms, and coping skills.

We were just finishing up with the interview and I had one more question I had to ask. The nervousness returned. I started to get uncomfortable but I knew I couldn't leave without asking. I needed to know if this was hereditary. Was I going to end up with this disease? Tom was prepared. It took just a short time for him to explain the answer to the question that had been

weighing on my mind the most. He gave me a lot of good information to take away with me and use.

My next interview was with Staci Beck, a certified nurse aid at Covenant. Staci works with schizophrenia patients on the psychiatric unit. She was able to explain to me the symptoms that she has observed first hand, treatments that are used, and the everyday routines. Staci was also able to share with me the types of things the doctors look for when making a decision on whether the patient is ready to go home.

Although I was very comfortable with this interview since it was familiar information from when my mom has been a patient there, it was difficult revisiting those memories.

I also decided to see how Hollywood portrays schizophrenia so I watched two movies. The first one was “One Flew Over The Cuckoo’s Nest.” This is an older movie, a comedy from 1975. It was about an out-of-control man that is put in a state mental hospital. He is put there by the Department of Corrections to be evaluated for mental illness. While there he stirs up a lot of chaos and befriends several mental patients, some with schizophrenia. As I watched the movie, I recognized procedures that I’ve seen at Covenant psych unit. The only part of the movie that I enjoyed was the connection and friendship that he made with the patients.

The other movie was “The Soloist”, which is about a newspaper columnist, Steve Lopez, who befriends a mentally ill homeless person, Nathaniel Ayers. Inspired by Nathaniel’s story, Steve writes a series of articles about him. Nathaniel has a passion for music and Beethoven. He attends Julliard for almost two years. He suffers from schizophrenia and goes untreated. Steve

wants to help Nathaniel and pushes him to do things outside of his comfort zone. Steve finally realizes that he can't cure Nathaniel. All he can do is be his friend and show up.

This movie was outstanding. It brought to life the true struggles from both perspectives of schizophrenia. Steve had so much passion and a drive to do all that he could to make Nathaniel the man he thought he should be. Towards the end he got angry when he couldn't fix him. It was these parts I could connect with as I have experienced them also.

The next step I took was to look up information on the internet and read sections from my psychology book. My internet search listed an overwhelming number of websites that I could choose from. I then had to find one that had good information and was credible.

When I went to schizophrenia.com I found that almost all of the people affiliated with this site have a PhD and come from reputable universities. The information offers support and education to the family members, caregivers, and individuals whose lives have been impacted by schizophrenia. The information from their website is endless. I felt comfortable in knowing that there was a website so dedicated to providing quality information to all people involved with this disease.

The psychology book was helpful in that it filled in the blanks. It added more information about the types of schizophrenia and how they categorize some symptoms. These last pieces of information brought schizophrenia into perspective.

Scheduling and doing the interviews, watching the movies, and reading the material was easy. It was just gathering the information I needed, not really thinking about it. Then it

was time to sift through it. I needed to really make sense of the information, sort it all out, and put it on paper. To do that I had to think about all of this knowledge that I had just gained, let it sink in, and pay attention to it. That's when I hit a wall. It was all very overwhelming and emotional. At this very moment, I had to accept that my mom has this horrible disease and she will never be the same as she was before. It made me sick to my stomach. How was I going to let my mind deal with this and stay focused enough to put this paper together? After allowing myself enough time to digest the information, I feel that I can now move towards what I have learned.

What I Have Learned (or failed to learn)

By exploring the information needed for my topic, I have learned many things. Schizophrenia is said to be one of the most severe and disabling of all mental disorders. (Bernstein 2008) It usually develops between the ages of 17-25, although it can affect children. It is seen equally in men and women but generally appears later in life for women. (Chiko 1995) One out of every one hundred persons will be affected/diagnosed with schizophrenia. 2.5 million American adults have the disease. (Eachus 2011) If you have a close blood relative with schizophrenia, your risk increases to seven in one hundred. (Chiko 1995) Balance, a healthy lifestyle, and the avoidance of drugs and alcohol are some practices for lowering your risk. Ten percent of people with schizophrenia commit suicide. (Eachus 2011)

There are 5 types of schizophrenia: paranoid, disorganized, catatonic, undifferentiated, and residual. (Eachus 2011) (Bernstein 2008) The delusional symptoms tend to fall into three general categories: delusions of influence which focuses on the belief that one's body, thinking,

or behavior are being controlled by external forces; self-significant delusions involve exaggerated beliefs about oneself; and delusions of persecution are when they believe that others are out to harass or harm them. (Bernstein 2008)

Symptoms are treated with medication. (Beck 2011) There are 16-18 anti-psychotic meds. For patients that have difficulty remembering to take their medications, there are some that can be injected every few months. Professionals have what they call "The Thirds Factor." One third of patients will respond well to meds, one third will somewhat respond to meds, and one third it doesn't matter- the medications are not going to work. (Eachus 2011)

I have learned that their reality is as real to them as ours is to us. It doesn't matter how much proof you provide to show them otherwise, they still believe their delusions. They live in fear most of the time depending on the severity of the disease. (Forman 1975) (Wright 2009)

A very important piece that I have learned is that I'm not alone in this. There are people out there that experience the same feelings that I do. There are support groups for families of loved ones with schizophrenia. There are many family members of schizophrenia patients who seek out individual therapy to deal with their own difficult situations. (Chiko 1995)

There are just a couple of things that I failed to learn throughout this process. The first is the cause of schizophrenia. Researchers are unsure of where it comes from or how it originates. Nancy Andersen, a leading researcher at the University of Iowa is working diligently to answer this question. (Eachus 2011) The second is heredity. I know that it's hereditary but I'm still not certain if I will get it.

I think that I have gained enough knowledge from this assignment that I can move forward in the relationship with my mom and in life.

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